

EXUBERANCE



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SUBMISSIONS: Stories, articles, reviews, art work, etc are most welcome. Fiction submissions should be typed, double spaced and accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. Fiction length is not necessarily restricted, although most published material will be from 500-10,000 words. All submissions should be sent to the magazine's main address.

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Welcome to the second edition of Exuberance magazine. Over the last two months I have received many letters of praise and constructive criticism. (For readers views see our letters page.) However many of you have asked me what the true aim of Exuberance will be. Let me tell you:

Exuberance will primarily offer a publishing outlet for new writers. We will obviously feature the work of established writers, but the onus will be on the up and coming newcomers.

The balance of fiction will be varied and we hope to be able to cater for everyone's tastes. SF, Fantasy and Horror fiction will be featured in the widest forms. Experimental and challenging fiction will also play a major part.

From issue #3, we intend to feature a discussion section. Each issue a writer will be able to discuss his/her work in detail. Viewpoints on publishing markets and other topical areas will also be featured. We hope to be able to include examples of the writer's own work, together with a comprehensive bibliography of their published fiction. All in all, we intend to offer writers a show-case for their work, discussing aims, influences, hopes, dreams and their expectations for the future.

From issue #3 we will also feature a number of articles on various authors and other topical subjects. Craig Turner starts the ball rolling with his comprehensive review of Peter Straub's novels.

All you artists out there don't feel left out. Exuberance intends to offer as much support to up and coming illustrators that it possibly can. We are always interested to see new work, so if you are interested please send your art portfolios to the main address.

Apologies for the late arrival of this issue. Our schedule mentioned in issue #1 was a bit ambitious we feel now. However Exuberance will continue

to appear four times a year as promised. Issue #3 is scheduled for early May 1991. Contributors include: Colin Davies, D.F. Lewis, Peter Tennant, David Windett, Roger and Russell Morgan, and many others.

Finally some news about the 'Best Of the Rest' anthology we mentioned last issue. Plans are still afoot for this new publication, which will feature the best small press fiction of 1990. We believe it should be available early 1991. When we have the exact details confirmed we will let you know.

That just leaves me to say thank you all for your much needed support. Until next time.

Jason Smith.
Editor/Publisher.

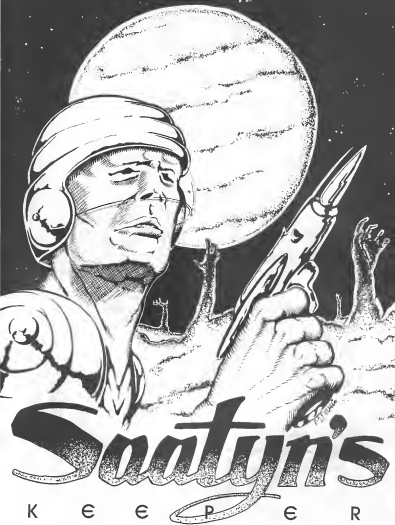
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Saatyn's

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Henry discovered a tear of blood on his index finger, gleaming balligerently red in the sharply angled white light. He focused his attention on the finger, held it an inch before his eyes. Followed the whorls that curved in exact patterns, aerial photographs of paddy fields in symmetrical contours. Saw them as if for the first time. Turning the finger, the nail was carved smooth and round, its edges ingrained with oil and dirt. There were also traces of foreign blood ebbing over the fissures of the knuckle joints like pools of rain across cart tracks.

He felt contaminated by the blood, and shifted attention beyond the finger, registering a shape rearing from the rock plateau of the forehead he squatted on. A basalt arm extending a hundred feet into the air. Each hair on the column's eon-aged surface was finely etched. Around its girth bo-constrictor blood vessels raised thickly, forking and twisting. Each pore magnified and outlined by the setting alien sun, the drizzle of shadow was fascinating, but his interest drifted. The carved fingers, so high above him, clutched at the sky in a gesture of universal frustration.

An insect's hollow drone. No other sound.

Eventually Henry realised the fingers were accusing him. There could be no escape from this pronouncement. Following that decision he crouched on the rock forehead for an hour, void of sensation. Paralysis claimed him. No emotion. No reactions. All centres numbed. His eyes see and his eyes hear but nothing connects. A sensory deadness protects him from guilt and insanity. But his body shakes in deep tremors and his nails bite deep into his own flesh until blood trickles down from his fist.

He stayed that way, iced lead lining his gut, until cramp attacked his legs forcing movement. Beneath his feet a tide of small fissures, of worry wrinkles, ebb in striated ripples down to the distant frozen forest of eyebrows rimming the curve of horizon. Beyond that, Saatyn's topography shelves sharply to form the crater eye sockets, two vast enclosed seas inset into the plain.

Between Henry's crouching knees lay the plundered carcass of the tiny

world's murdered Simian. Its exposed ribs laughed dull white through gleaming ruptures of flesh like grotesque teeth. Its skeleton lisbs plucked bare of edible meat. While the parts of the corpse that even hunger couldn't induce him to eat, the genitalia and digestive tract, he'd torn from the body and exploded in bloody arcs across the rock. Muscle, tendons and entrails squatting in bizarre pools and mounds.

And the skull. Oddly it looked more human than he dared admit in fleshless nakedness.

He carefully wiped incriminating flecks of blood from his index finger onto the coarse grey fabric of his soiled tunic, turned and began loping stealthily down the forehead, leaping runnels. The air was thin, the discomfort caused by the exertion sharply reaffirming his sense of reality, countering the tendency to become detached and lethargic, a tendency that had become worryingly frequent over the previous long days. At intervals in his descent statuesque dismembered human or carved half-human shapes erupted in isolation from the plain, to be frozen at the moment of emergence. There were also pools of amber from which floating eyeballs pleaded upwards in an eternity of pain.

At length Henry passed through the petrified forest of curved stone eyebrows, the arched interior of a cathedral far above his head, until he was able to make his way like a stooping parasite down the ridge of the hominid nose. Midway down he had to skirt the shattered remains of the back-broken derigible that had brought him to the planetoid what seemed an age ago. Twisted girders and steelworks were strewn around the central blackened hulk where they'd been blasted by explosions and the impact shock. An exhaling pall of smoke continued in a never-ending sigh that bathed his eyes with stinging acid, even from this distance. Superstition made him avoid the charred framework and the bodies that had also been smashed and burned beyond recognition, human and ape forms curled into the foetuses of death.

Gratefully he continued beyond the wreck, further down in the direction



of the cavernous nostril openings. Inside their sheltering twilight he felt safe enough to lie down. With his journey over he crossed the threshold into a welcoming void of darkness. A purge of soft, nothingness. The interior walls were smooth stone tissue, gently curved to mould the contours of his spine. He hunched down, head between knees, conscious of the accumulated mask of his body, the stink of sweat suffocating him in its warm human aromas. Conscious of the resented ape blood and imagined skin tissue irritating beneath his nails.

He feared to relax his mind in sleep. Feared the voices and memories that he knew would emerge as soon as he lowered the guard of waking control. Tried to think of Marie instead. Marie who carried chastity in her head where it was safe from strangers, but who shared her body with whoever she felt needed it. He thought of the uneasy year they'd spent living together in the damp-patterned basement room, the air cool and brittle with tensions and fear. It could have been so different, he mused, in different circumstances. He relaxed, attempting to think of nothing. But his exhausted body was powerless to resist the encroachment of sleep. He slept.

Immediately the alien memories assailed him ... a vivid moonrise over a complex and beautiful canal system, with baroque vessels pulsing on the swell of lock-gates ... an army marching through torrential rain, the wounded hobbling, supported by comrades, drenched bandages dripping pink water into churned-up mud ... a monolithic dam splintered by silent detonations, exploding pent-up yellow liquid through smashed earthworks. People screaming, running, consumed in feral sulphur tide ... bank upon bank of incomprehensible machinery, with lemur creatures performing a series of apparently random alterations ... lights welling up through layers of squirming cell tissue like trapped quassars ... a fishing village by a clam ocean inlet. Mangroves on stilts wading out into the jewelled water. Craftsmen mending nets with brown fingers. Women tending hominid children. Then the tide erupting and thrashing in a slash of expanding crimson as a swimmer is dragged beneath the surface by a submerged

predator ...

Waking was hard. The reality of the curved rock beneath him suddenly transient. A flimsy veneer against nightmare. Wordless voices wash around the back of his brain. Visions and memories fight the sensory impressions of waking with alternative pictures of 'reality'. Past and present vortex about him in lunatic juxtaposition.

... a girls face, Marie talking at him soundlessly as they scuff hunched against the cold beneath a dirty many-legged fly-over, auto-lights forking the darkness like moving neons above them, wind cutting through the austere complex of haunted colonnades ... insects whirring on pellucid wings through Brobdingnagian jungle, scaled and chitinously armoured grubs writhing along the virulent limbs of roughly-fissured scarlet trunks, two men in violent combat against a background of strange foliage ... a tideless ocean where slime and single-celled creatures congeal, and the slender finger of a space-craft on a windless shore of featureless igneous rock beside the leafless scrawl of a tree, severed hands impaled on each bare brunch-top ... an unsatisfactory act of love in a dirty damp-patched basement apartment that left him resentful and bitter ...

Hendry moved to the mouth of the 'cave', the opening of the nostrils. Light slanted silver, throwing a sprawl of fantastic shadows, beautifully evil. His concrete-lidded eyes follow the sensual incline of stone lips into the endless air beyond Saatyn, the asteroid that imprisoned him. Beyond that sky he could barely discern the ghost shapes of the worldlet's nearest neighbours - tiny Thuria, the uneven outline of Velga, and further away the eccentric form of Mlankest, one of the largest of the uninhabited worlds in the unexplored interior. Cosmically, a spit away. In human terms, eternity. Hendry closed his eyes, weakness and helplessness insinuating through his lethargy.

Again the visions ... an eyeless sacrificial victim hurled by priests from the heights of a ziggurat. Curling, dancing crimson into the awesome sunset, while a grotesquely huge octopoid deity of myriad-tentacled jet has its living web of eyes replenished ... a line of

machines moving jerkily on quadruped legs across an airless plain in search of water ...

* * *

The asteroid system that trapped him was a festering cluster of planetary junk. A hundred large islands and millions of lesser bodies of varying shapes and sizes globed in a bubble of breathable air twice the size of Jupiter. Each island shabby and overgrown with jungles of weed, inhabited by mongrel races of Simians. Human expeditions classified them as the devolved remnants of a civilization that had created the system millions of years before Earthmen first ventured into space. The whole complex, worlds and air envelope, was artificial. Held together by gravity coagulants, the technology and location of which had been long forgotten.

The blazing air-ship that carried Hendry to Saatyn had impaled itself across bizarre rock formations. Hendry ejecting in time, reaching safety to watch mesmerised as the cumbersome craft cut jagged slivers of flame into the night, casting grasping questing shadows towards him. Inside the craft the crew were dying. Their trapped cries audible above the raster of vociferous flame. He alone had been thrown clear. At first he considered survival to be sheer luck, watching as the flames died, and with them the cries. Later he'd envied the dead. In the afterglow of flames his eyes grew accustomed to the twilight, and he'd been able to gauge his situation. The derigible had broken its back across a sudden outcrop that formed the nose of a Simian face carved from the contours of the asteroid's surface.

But just before dawn there'd been an additional shape in the darkness.

Still bruised and shaken from the crash he saw moving eyes - and fired. Confused, fearful, his fingers on the stud reacting without thought, once, twice, three times he fired. Heard the satisfying cries of pain. Watched the Simian thrash to death. Watched it again and again, the hands reaching out, grasping air, clawing at nothing, white teeth glinting in carnivorous smiles. Watched it in memory as days lengthened. Watched as he explored the

worldlet that had suddenly become the limits of his universe. A whole asteroid moulded into distinctive apish features. The hominids who now lived small uneventful lives in peasant villages of huts and crudely tended fields while cities abandoned ten thousand years crumbled back into dust. Cities of frightful towers, arches, graceful bridges, broad worn-stone steps, underways and steep narrow inclines.

Hendry watched in memory as it became increasingly clear that the beast he'd killed had been the only other living being on the entire asteroid. And all the while mind pictures fought across his vision ... banks of humming incomprehensible machines tended by lemur creatures ... an ocean of molten lead beneath an alien sky, bubbles of gas glimmering to the surface and splashing into the atmosphere in multi-hued shoals ... ragged survivors moving rodent-like through a shattered city, watching spheres of glass blizzard from urine-yellow clouds to settle over the ruins ...

He relived his escape from Earth to the Epsilon Eradini system in search of the legendary wealth of the space island's forgotten civilisation. Driven by resentment, remorse, and the haunting memory of Marie who he'd been unable to hold for longer than a squalid, frustrating, idyllic year.

In persistent memory he saw the air-ship crippled by storms of wind-blown debris hurtling down towards Saatyn, the legendary forbidden world at the very centre of the system. The place the Simians shunned with dread, which legend omitted even from charts of the interior. In memory he watched from the craft's observation blister as its idiosyncratic shape expanded to fill the sky. The first surreal face growing from apparently random formations and shadows. Then the smaller carvings and statues welling up from within its dimensions. A morass of limbs and severed portions of bodies like a charnel house of butchered corpses. Watched mesmerised as the 'ship hurtled towards impact.

* * *

... a man running through a subterranean labyrinth of gleaming white bone, breath scalding his ribs

with pain, eyes wide with terror ... a young girl's nipples glimpsed through a cascading veil of ebony hair ...

He blinked away the visions. After-images and voices continued conversations in his head.

... ancient musicians wearing animal skulls playing atonal music from fluted mouthpieces while naked youths dance in a square formed by ebony-and-viridian domes, weaving around a nest of singing crystals with human hearts ... a man speaking excitedly, jabbing patterns in the air for emphasis ... apes astride rippling asexual mantarays riding cloud-thermals through flocks of cerise flamingoes in a sky dominated by the incandescent disc of a turning planet, ice caps, oceans, boiling weather systems and continents storming behind them ...

Voices separating out into alarming cacophony.

Handry edged back from the full glare of daylight, as if to hide from its sharp definition, back into the gaping cave of nostrils. Back into twilight and continuing further into depths of total blackness, waiting there until his eyes adjusted and he was able to pick out the pattern of tunnels stretching down into the heart of the asteroid. The voices, the images, ebbing and flowing like reception on a poorly tuned radio, like sound reverberating in an echo cage. A distracting monotony of subliminal murmur that baffled the process of thought.

He had an image of himself. A vision of remarkable clarity. A small carved figure moving across a landscape of carved figures until his identity merged with that of the statues. He as much a prisoner as they. He was moving, plagued by fear, growing into the stone, doubting the distinction between flesh and rock.

There was an image of cannibalism.

He'd been driven by hunger to eat the Simian he'd killed. The Simian he'd murdered. There was blood on his teeth. The moist smell of mouldering fur. A humanoid skull beneath his heels. The full implications of his actions suddenly apparent. Revulsion and nausea canted his stomach. Spasms of agonised sickness, while each of the million nightmares trapped in his brain vomited. A universe of trapped vomiting creatures.

A rivulet of spittle irrigated his chin.

By a concerted effort of will he forced his mind away. Thought of Marie's face in half-light, illuminated by the flickering flame of an incense candle. The memory tinged with the bitterness of parting. The resentment of the squalor that had dominated his life, the social injustices that his abruptly terminated relationship with Marie had brought so sharply into focus. That had provided the determination to kick off Earth and seek the enticing wealth of space. His interest in Saaty's tantalising legend had already been there, the sponsorship necessary to get his ideas into action had been more difficult to obtain, but had eventually been provided by an obscure extra-terrestrial Geographical Society. They'd financed the expedition and provided transport to the Epsilon Eradix Cluster. Handry could see himself leaving the starship at Myrrr, the cluster's only port sufficiently free of orbiting debris to be accessible from deep space. A run-down landing field and blast-apron near a magnificently abandoned Simian city and a haphazard cluster of trading posts, bars, brothels, missionary stations, and various archaeological and administrative buildings beneath a cloud-piled swudge of mountains. Hominids hung about on mud-rutted street corners begging, or merely watching human activity beyond the humid dance of heat-haze with dumb uncomprehending eyes. From the ingress post Handry had commenced the next stage of his journey, ferrying inwards towards the system's uncharted interior in native air-ships crewed by reluctant Simian and out-of-work human drifters bribed into joining the venture. Over the following months they'd passed shoals of lesser asteroidal bodies, mapping, recording, taking readings, sometimes stopping off to refuel or replenish supplies, moving ever-inwards towards the heart of the complex of orbits.

The asteroid cluster had been known to human beings for almost a century, and from the beginning its mystery had proved fatally mesmeric. The devices welding it in stasis had functioned for millions of years. The secret of its power source could revolutionise



the galaxy, yet no expedition to find Saaty'n, mounted by a diversity of Terran and non-Terran races, had survived to return with its prize.

For Hendry the memories became more insistent and brutally delineated. He crouched down as images multiplied, his own and alien memories fighting for possession of his skull. At first he took them for hallucinations brought on by hunger or fever delirium. But now other causes suggested themselves unbidden.

Cannibalism.

The thought etched itself deep.

Voices coming from consumed Simian flesh in his gut.

... a heavily tapestried hall, hooded and ceramic-masked men moving in pairs chanting litanies in a lost language, facias and robes awash with candle-light ...

The voices began as he slept after hunger first drove him to the corpse. A distant murmur. Faintly audible beneath his own dreams. But increasing with each passing night as he'd eaten more. As soon as he slept they'd crawl from his subconscious. A babel of forgotten memories screaming for attention.

... columns of almost-men riding mastodonian creatures across a garish landscape of luminous grey fungi, drifts of spiralling spores misting details ...

Until the kaleidoscope spilled over into waking hours, clawing up from the surface of nightmare.

... rioting people screaming hatred as armoured insects emerge from the arteries of city streets, gun turrets questing ...

At first he could exercise a degree of selection. Tried to concentrate on Marie, wondering what she was doing on light-years distant Earth among its depressing thronged never-ending filthy city-blocks. Tried to picture her working within the upper echelons of the monopolistic Corporation its corruption had elevated to, so far out of his reach. But the world he'd known, the memories that belonged to it, were unreal and unconvincing beside the Simian-induced images.

He blundered on through the semi-darkness of the nasal passage, his mouth dry as death. Even here the hard basalt interior is covered with limbs and bodies emerging like thanatos from

beneath the rational levels of the mind. Again the disjointed ghost-voices drift at him from empty places. And the vision of ultimate devices set in motion at the beginning of time to sustain the system. Its civilisation faded, but the devices still function, requiring only a renewable sentient element. A living creature sufficiently complex to provide the biological ingredient of consciousness.

A role filled by a multitude of adventurers from many races attempting to penetrate the mystery of the planetoids, who'd been trapped in inescapable Faustian pact. They absorbed the technical information and the full panorama of memories from generations of predecessors enabling them to fulfil the technological demands of Saaty'n's eternal devices. In return the keeper was kept artificially alive long beyond its natural life-span - until a replacement presented itself.

Hendry tried to claw the image away, but it stuck tenaciously. He remembered his first night on Saaty'n, when he'd seen moving eyes beyond the darkness, wolf-eyes yellow as topaz - and he'd fired. Confused and fearful, his finger on the stud reacting without thought, once, twice, three times he'd fired. Heard the satisfying cries of pain. Watched the Simian thrash its death agonies. Hands reaching out, grasping air, clawing at nothing. And the white teeth glinting, carnivorous smiles ...

He shook the memory away fearfully. Yet it persisted as the replacement keeper moved further down the tunnel towards the centre of the asteroid.

Hendry could hear the pululation of distant machinery.

Andrew Darlington lives in West Yorkshire. He is no newcomer to the SF small press. His work has appeared in *The Edge*, *Nightfall* and *Maelstrom* amongst others. However he is probably better known for his published poetry and also his involvement in the music business. He has recently conducted interviews with Robert Plant and The Stone Roses.

THE UPSTAIRS ROOM

The bar was crowded; the air warm and beery with cigarette smoke, talk, laughter. At times during the evening I felt uneasy and cramped. People are those things that hurry by on the street as you beg for money, their faces suddenly distracted by a window, a bird, a friend. Yet there I was, among them, drawn by their laughter, feeling also strangely distanced. Baxter seemed to sense this. He smiled at me with his crumpled mouth and told me to drink, urging that we get another before the bell called last orders.

"You've been out of play a long time, haven't you?" He said.

"I'm not used to people," I mumbled, "Not like this."

He nodded. "Well, I suppose it must seem a bit odd."

I smiled and finished my pint. "A bit? An evening more often means..." Something stopped me and I looked at the glass, watched the last of the froth collect in the bottom and turn into amber fluid. "You're very kind," I said.

Baxter shrugged and took my glass. Pushing himself to his feet, he leaned closer. "I know about loneliness." He moved away into the crowd and I was left to peel apart another beer mat. If I smoked, I would probably have lit one at this point.

* * *

I had been in the northern city now for three days. The first night, I slept in a shop doorway, my eyes clenched tight against the headaches that periodically stab me almost blind. The second night I met Baxter. I was on a bench in a park wrapped in a blanket. The blanket had been my great find of the day. It was in a skip by the roadside matted with plastic-dust and riddled with holes. Baxter was walking his dogs. He has two King Charles' Spaniels with rancid breath and eyes like discoloured fried eyes. As he neared the bench, he

slowed and gazed from beneath his battered hood. A lean man with intense features, he stood there for several minutes disguising his interest by quietly prompting the dogs to do their business.

He let me sleep on his sofa after tea, toast, and conversation. It turned out that he was a research student; something to do with computers. His degree he gained in some other city and, because of his work, he knew very few people here. I left his rented house after two paracetamol and breakfast and promised to see him again.

* * *

Carefully placing two pints on the table, he resumed his stool.

"How long are you planning to stay?" He asked.

"I'll leave tomorrow," I said, "if that's okay."

He smiled. "The town. When are you planning to leave the town?"

"Oh." I shrugged and looked around me. A girl no older than myself was peering through the window, her breath steaming in the night air. "I don't know. I'd not thought about it."

"Any more migraines?"

I shook my head. Only that afternoon I had been blinded and eventually retched dry until tears pricked my eyes.

"If they come back, you should get help, you know," he said.

I told him I knew, asked him how his research was going. He talked in his quiet, measured way, something about data storage systems and data processing.

"The idea, you see," he concluded, "is to improve the robot's capabilities to collect and process the information it receives and not just to relay it back to wherever." He looked at me and smiled. "It's a big step to have the robot act independently on the data rather than just be a relay post or a data recorder."

"It sounds very complex," I said, rather inadequately, and he pursed his lips and nodded sagely. Behind him, the girl at the window turned and disappeared into a glare of car headlamps.

"So that," he explained, "is what brings me to this place." He raised his eyebrows. "And what about you?"

I looked at him, taken off guard.

"What brings you here?"

"I'm not..." Sipping my pint, I collected my thoughts. "I think I used to live here," I said. "Then I... There's just been a series of incidents that made me think that I should come back."

An expression of curiosity disfigured his face. He sucked in his cheeks, lowered his brow.

"You say you think you used to live here?"

With an embarrassed smile, I nodded.

"I'm not sure."

"You're no older than twenty-five," he said.

"I just can't remember."

He looked at me with his odd, intense eyes until he suddenly seemed satisfied and began to tell me about a childish incident in the university refectory that he had been witness to earlier that day.

* * *

Now let me tell you about the real reasons I returned to this place. That's not to say that I lied to Baxter. He was easy to lie to, but I could not deceive him; maybe not tell him the whole truth, but not deceive him. As far as I could see, we were both looking in on society from the wrong side of the glass. The cruel circle that drives people into social exile operated for us both. In this case, he was a nervous newcomer to the city, trapped in research that gave him little time to make the friends he needed. In turn, this drove him to seek comfort in his work and his pets. Me? I was a drop-out, although "drop-out" suggests passing from "in" to "out", and I have no memory of "in". I cannot recall my parents, my school, my friends, my past. It seems I entered the world at the age of fifteen and spent a decade living a life of aimless and penniless wandering. Until now.

The headaches had been growing steadily worse. They began about two years ago, nothing more than annoying twinges. Only in the past six months have they left me paralysed and near-blind. They make me vomit. It's usually blood and bile because food is scarce. Sometimes I think I'm going to die, but then there are the dreams.

Sleep has been fitful and laced with visions. I wake screaming, swathed in a skin of cold sweat, knuckles white, fists clenched, every bone in my spine on fire. And I remember the substance of the dreams as if it were lying before me on polaroids. I see red sand, burning suns, constructs of steel and perspex that have been scoured by the desert. I see faces. I see faces I have always known but never understood. Sometimes I believe they are the ghosts of my parents, and I try to rationalise my growing fears by attaching names to them, carving a fictitious family around myself. Still it remains elusive.

The headaches, the dreams: these are not the limits of my condition, but they are the aspects that most resemble a sickness. There are others that don't.

* * *

In the cold light of morning, I walked to the edge of the city, past small shops and newsagents in need of paint and custom. I walked to the junction. One road went straight into town interrupted only by traffic lights. One road went down towards the university, skirting the park where Baxter and I first met. One road went out towards the countryside and the bridge. I stood at the end of this road, looked along its length at the terraced houses on one side, the tall pokers of street lights, the trees that, in Summer, must form a canopy over the dark tarmac.

Slowly, I began to walk on the graveyard side, my hands buried deep in my threadbare jeans, my coat pulled tight around my body. I heard the purr of cars by my side, the occasional roar of a lorry or a bus. Now and again I glanced at the houses and checked the numbers. It is a nervous habit, not a necessity, for although I have no memory of ever having been



there before, I knew which house I would stop outside.

Number Three-Nine-Seven.

Don't ask me how I know. Don't even ask me why. This is another condition of my "sickness". This is the house that I have dreamed about. This is the reason I knew I must return to the Northern town: to find this house.

And it looks exactly as I pictured it in my head; the tall facade sooted with exhaust fumes, the moss-green paintwork peeling to reveal rotting wood, the windows unwashed, litter and the last leaves of a late Autumn collecting in the open porch. I leaned against the low graveyard wall and looked at it, and again and again my eyes were drawn to the leering bay of the upstairs room. There was no way to see inside. The terrace ran East to West and the sun travelled along the spine of the roofs favouring the yards and alleyways at the back if it favoured anything at all. I watched the house until I felt the first twinges of a headache strike me at the nape of the neck, then I retired to the shadows of a tree in the graveyard and suffered alone.

The pain began to ease as the shadows grew longer and the cars swept a slow wave out of town. I looked up and around. There had been rain. My clothes and the grass were spangled with moisture and I felt cold and feverish, eyes aching as if haemorrhaged in my skull. I glanced uneasily at the house in the distance. And only as I moved to leave did I become aware of the figure standing by the wall. It seemed to me that it watched the house like a child watches a magician. The night was drawing in. If the day had been closer to its end, I could have believed the figure to have been a statue carved from the same dark stone as the wall.

I returned to the warmth of Baxter's house.

* * *

"So tell me about your earliest memory." Baxter was wearing his glasses. They perched on the bridge of his nose and made him look hungry as he leaned forward from the depths of his musty armchair.

I shrugged. "I don't have one."

"You must have," he said. "Memory is

chronological, to some degree at least."

A sigh escaped my lips. "I don't remember."

"Think," he prompted quietly. "Does it relate to your mother?"

"I don't remember a mother."

"Your father then?"

I shook my head.

"You said you thought you lived here," he said. "Yes? I'm sure you did. Well what makes you believe this to be the case?"

Again I shrugged. The dreams and the almost primitive urge to return were not something I could communicate, not to Baxter.

"So tell me," he persisted, "what you do remember."

"I remember walking a street."

"Where was this street?"

"I'm not sure."

"North or south?"

"Streets look much the same all over."

He smiled and sat back, elbows resting on the arms of the chair, fingers meshed. "The tea should be brewed by now, Mark."

While I poured, he looked at me, half-concealed amusement around his eyes. I took my time, careful only to watch the spout of the teapot and never to glance at his leather features. The room smelled of tea and old furniture.

"Thank you. Now," he said, "I don't want to pester you, but I do find this all very intriguing. Do you object?"

I said I didn't in a manner that suggested I did, but he merely smiled faintly and reached for the biscuits.

"So what do you dream about? If I may."

A shiver of doubt passed through my shoulders. "What do you dream about?"

His pale eyes gazed off into space, hands absent-mindedly breaking off a piece of biscuit and feeding it to a dog that waited by his feet. "Oh I dream about fame, adventure, achievements..." He smiled. "And having my wicked way with attractive young ladies in the most unlikely places." His eyebrows raised in a comical expression of shock, as if he had not intended to voice the last words.

I laughed.

"And how about you?"

The laugh stopped. "I dream about

strange things," I said.

"Young Ladies?"

"No."

"Young Men?"

I shook my head.

"So in what way could these dreams be said to be strange?"

I sipped my tea. "They just are. Can we leave this?"

He nodded slowly, thinking. "You certainly are an unusual young man, you know. Have you ever suffered from amnesia?"

"No."

"Merely curious. Merely curious."

We drank tea in silence, listening to the movements of the clock on the heat-stained sideboard.

* * *

April, I stayed in a squat in Manchester. It was around the time when the headaches were growing steadily more severe. I spent many days unable to move. Crippled with pain, I stretched on an old mattress while Corinne, homeless and concealed by dark, beautiful eyes, brought me food. She never told me where the money came from, and I, for my part, never asked. But we ate well and never cheapened our friendship with idle chatter. I knew nothing about her.

One day I felt well enough to leave the squat, and stayed out all day. I returned laden with junk. There were old bottles in many sizes and colours, magazines wrinkled with damp and grease, scissors stolen from W.H. Smiths. Corinne watched me silently as I stored them in a darkened corner. Her eyes showed no curiosity, no interest. It was not in her nature to ask questions. She had no use for the answers.

That evening, after she left, I cut faces from the magazines, stuck them onto the empty bottles and arranged them around myself. I created a mother, a father, two sisters, two brothers. They ranged around me, the last embers of sunlight captured in their glass shells. It left me cold. Their fragile bodies and paper masks paralysed me. Trapped by their photogenics and advertising smiles, I felt like a man accused. And as their cruel eyes stole the glare of the streetlights and watched me

maddeningly, I seized each one, felt the cold glass, threw them to the street below. The shattering of my family haunted my dreams for months.

The night I murdered my glass family, Corinne was arrested in Picadilly.

* * *

I took my leave of Baxter's hospitality before he left for university, a folder labelled "The Robot: Decision Making from Selected Data" beneath his arm. He gave me cheese sandwiches wrapped in foil and a container of paracetamols. He pressed them into my hands and told me to take care.

That night I slept beneath the awning of a small boat down in the marina. I listened to the lapping water, the creaking of the moorings, the distant sounds of city nightlife as first pubs then clubs emptied. Then I was alone. In my mind I saw Baxter, saw Corinne, saw the girl who watched us in the pub; and gently, as sleep slipped into my thoughts, I saw my imaginary family, the moon shining through their transparent bodies.

And suddenly I found myself back on the graveyard wall, the pads of my fingers touching damp moss and crumbling stone. Night hung above me, a sated moon in its arms. It sickened the road and terrace facade with its cheery light, seemed to spotlight number three-nine-seven. I could not take my eyes from it. Even when Baxter stepped from the darkness and rested his lean form on the wall beside me, I remained transfixed.

"So this is what you dream about?" Baxter whispered.

"I know this house."

"Have you been inside?"

Almost imperceptibly, I shook my head.

Then for a second, I was inside; moving along the dark hallway and up the stairs, my hand reaching out for the banister, the smell of garage-stored apples in my mouth. Then it was gone, Baxter too. I was alone on the wall.

Iron bands, sharp and cold, cut into wrists and ankles raising thick calluses that smarted in the night air. I was not bound or chained; there was no need. The house held me

hypnotised like snake with prey. Yet I knew it would not harm me. No: I knew it could not harm me, for between us ran the road, a tarmac barrier between the graves of the living and the graves of the dead. It formed a no-man's land, a grim joke with its suggestion of limitless destinations. But in my heart I knew there was only one destination. I could see the light in the street, filtering from the upstairs room. And in that window stood a silhouetted figure.

I recoiled, feeling cold stone against my legs. In the darkness of this timeless zone, the figure watched, waiting for me, knowing soon I would drag myself to the house in search of a cure or an end to the sickness that afflicted me.

There was a grinding like mortar on pestle and the wall turned to powder, too much powder. It caked my hands with red dust. It filtered into my shoes like sand. It blew through air that grew warmer and brighter, and I saw the sky split and the light of three suns crack diseased smiles above my head. Turning, I found endless deserts of red sand stretching away into a heat haze, dunes punctuated with tombstones and dried grass.

I began to run, needles of pain lancing my eyes, feet pounding in sand, muscles aching, mouth watering with nausea, sand smoking behind me. Muscles tore in my stomach and I collapsed against a mossy stone. I touched its dampness, wanting to press my lips to its cool surface. It felt as if my skin were blistering, sliced from the bone by invisible blades. Then the most terrifying thing: the withered grass around my feet began to move; rippling like fingers, then seeming to rise and fall with the sand beneath it.

"Have you been inside?"

Baxter's voice came from nowhere, floating across the wastelands and mixing with my own horrified cries. The ground around me was trying to shrug itself free. In its violence it was splitting, clumps of damp, graveyard sod breaking loose and tumbling against the tilting stone. The stone itself was flaking and relaxing its tenure on the earth. Crumbling bones were coming to light, piercing the skin of epileptic soil

like spears.

"Mother?" I called, and in that second the stone toppled and shattered, the ground ruptured and a half-eaten figure rose into the air like the biggest bone of them all. It was a monster; tatters of flaxen hair, the remnants of a floral dress, most horrible of all, a glossy paper face like a carnival mask taped across its skull. It looked at me, photographic eyes registering constant delight at a non-existent product. Following her from the grave were the rest of the imaginary family. They trapped me with their perfect Kodak smiles. Their frozen faces showed delight and consumer contentment. They moved in closer, closer, closer.

I awoke.

* * *

The next day was overcast. I spent the morning in the city centre. I sat on a bench and ate one of Baxter's sandwiches, but the intrusion of food in my stomach brought cramps that left me doubled on a bench for almost five hours, an object of curiosity for bored shoppers. When the cramps finally subsided and I felt stronger, I bought some chips and counted the small number of coins I still had. Soon I would be penniless again and forced to beg or steal. The alternatives were to take advantage of Baxter's generous nature, or to finally go to the house at the edge of town. I knew I could not delay for much longer.

Sunset was a miserable affair; grey light fading into blackness and a chill wind blowing from the marina. It rattled the bare branches of the November trees and tumbled an empty cigarette carton along the road that led out of town. I watched it, hands deep in pockets and coat pulled tight around my neck. From the corner of my eye, I was aware of a light in the upstairs window of Three-nine-seven. It seemed like a beacon.

I did not dare to lean against the wall; it was too much like the dream. But now the house seemed more ominous, the window watching me like an eye. Absurd though it was, it seemed to be waiting for me. It felt as if the house itself was waiting for me to



finally surrender and step inside its anatomy of sooted brick and blocked guttering.

I turned. There was the stranger I had seen from the pub. Her dark shape was farther along the road, coat pulled tight around a slight body, face turned upwards to the light in the upstairs room. I began to walk, head lowered, trying to block out the paranoid watch of the house. Step after step and she seemed not to notice. Step after step and the space between us grew smaller. Step after step. I was no more than six metres away. Only then did the head lower and terrified eyes shone in my direction. Within seconds she was running.

Something stopped me from calling out. Uncertainty pinned me to the spot like a lepidopterist's study. Then, almost against my will, I gave chase. That was when I felt a wave of relief; the house was behind me, falling farther into the distance with every stretch. But this relief was tarnished by the memory of my pounding feet in the dream.

The girl neared the end of the road and turned, gasping, into the next. I followed, my head was light with exertion, the breath aching in my lungs. The gap was narrowing. Slowly I was closing on her. She ran nimbly across the road. Coat unbuttoned, forcing air into my lungs, I did the same. There was a glare of lights, scream of car horn, squeal of brakes. The car stopped no more than three feet from my legs.

* * *

Stared at and out of place, I waited outside the university library until Baxter scuttled from its doors. He carried a pile of volumes and a number of photocopies that flapped in the breeze.

"Baxter!"

He looked up like a surfacing mole and smiled absent-mindedly. Driving closer, he recognised me and greeted me.

"What brings you here, Mark?"

I shrugged. "I just wanted to see you."

"Migraines?"

"No."

"That's very promising." He began to

walk and I followed. "It's been two or three days since I last saw you, hasn't it?"

I agreed. It was two.

He peered over his glasses. They were reading glasses but he often forgot to remove them.

"So what have you been doing?"

"This and that," I said. "Almost got run over the other day."

He nodded as if forming an opinion on this. "Have you eaten today?"

I said I hadn't.

"Then let's. Come with me. We'll dine in the refectory, infernal place though it is."

We walked in silence for a few minutes, through the grounds and up steps to the union building.

"Baxter," I said, "You remember asking me about dreams the other day?"

He nodded, muttered that he did.

"Well I had one the other day. It was a nightmare."

Over lunch, I told him about the dream. It was still etched clearly in my mind and I could recall the finest details, the colours and senses. He listened intently, nodding encouragingly, spooning coleslaw into his mouth. I went on to explain about the events outside the house. When I finished he sat back. His face showed him digesting data and lunch.

"One thing puzzles me," he said at length. "Well, two things really. The first is this: your memory is really very very good on recent events, wouldn't you say? You have full recall, which, I would say, is quite unusual. More so, when the first fifteen years of your life is a complete grey zone."

He looked at me with raised eyebrows and I nodded.

"The second thing is, how you remember this house, and why haven't you already knocked on the door?" He dabbed his mouth with a tissue. "You've been here almost a week now, Mark."

"Would you tell me," I asked, "to do that?"

"I wouldn't tell you to do anything," he said, "but it does seem like a logical step."

I sighed and looked at the chatting students. "I'm afraid."

Baxter just shrugged.

She started as I grabbed her arm, tried to shake herself free. We were in the park. I had watched her from the darkness of bushes for almost five minutes, spotlight in the amber glow of a streetlight, coat pulled tight around her small breasts, sitting huddled on a bench. Now she looked afraid.

"Please," I hissed. "I don't want to hurt you."

She said nothing.

"Who are you?"

She glared at my restraining hand with shiny black eyes, lips pursed. No more that five feet tall, she had a pale, elfin face that was at once vulnerable and lined with cunning. Her hair was cropped like velcro and there were no traces of make-up. She looked at me silently.

I paused. "I'm not from the house, you know?"

She said nothing, and I wondered if she even knew about the house, if she wasn't just a curious observer snared in my fantasy. I released my grip.

"I'm Mark," I said, "Mark Sykes."

A youth freewheeled through the park on a BMX. Distracted, I wondered if perhaps she was from the house. Had she been sent out to entrap me and make me finally surrender?

Her lips parted. "How do I know you're not from the house?" she asked, her voice little more than a pressure of air.

I said I didn't know.

"I've seen you there," she said.

"And I've seen you there," I replied, "and outside the pub: watching me."

She scuffed her shoe on the tarmac.

"I wanted to know if they sent you."

"Who?"

"They, the people from the house."

Digging my hands into my pockets, I asked her if that was where she came from. She shook her head, added tightly that her name was Ann. We fell silent.

"Why do you watch the house?" she asked at length.

I shrugged. "I have to. Why do you?"

"I just..." She broke off and played with a button on her raincoat. "I don't know. I don't know why I'm here."

"Red sand," I whispered, and she looked at me in alarm. For almost a

minute she stared, maybe trying to rationalise a nightmare, or divine how I knew, or just summon courage to ask me to repeat it. Finally she parted her lips and moistened them nervously, one fist held against her chin.

"Three suns," she said.

* * *

The cafe was smoky, the ceiling stained with nicotine. Yellow linoleum peeled around the table legs and the counter on which stood perspex hatches like mortuary trays. Inside, sausage rolls sweated onto napkins. I bought two coffees with the last of my money and sat with her by the window watching the steam rising from the cups.

"Where've you come from?" I asked, my voice low.

She shrugged as she unbuttoned her coat. "Here and there."

"Where's that?"

A cold smile changed her face.

"You're very nosy."

I laughed wryly and glanced at the window. The condensation was too thick to see outside.

"So where do you come from?" she asked, mocking.

"Nowhere," I said. "That's my theory at least. I just appeared on the streets of one shitty town or another at the age of fifteen."

She stared at me.

"It's true," I said. "I'm a man with no past."

"Why?"

"Because," I began, leaning closer, "I have no memory of anything before that time. I haven't even got a family." I felt suddenly uncomfortable and added quickly, "As far as I know."

She shook her head, blew into her coffee.

"Do you remember your family?" I asked.

"No," she said, "But I've survived."

I said nothing, trying to frame an idea in terms that sounded reasonable.

"They're in that house," I said.

She laughed and shook her head, said it was wishful thinking, then leaned much closer across the greasy table.

"What's in that house," she whispered, "is more than family. Family can't make you sick."

"They'll know how to cure it."

"They can't give you dreams, Mark."

"They don't!" I sat back, then forward again. "Baxter said they could be psychosomatic."

"Whoever Baxter is, he doesn't know fuck."

"He does!"

"No." She glared at me now, her expression set hard. "If they were what he said, then how come I get them too? Does that make any sense?"

I drank coffee.

"Face it!" she said. "What's in that house is far more powerful than family."

I shrugged, denying the truth of her words.

"If it's family," she persisted, "then why haven't you already gone to meet them? Tell me that. If it's family there's no reason to be afraid."

"Maybe," I said.

She sighed. "You must realise it by now. You must! The fear that you feel is a fear of death." She looked at me expectantly. "Death! When we enter that house, it'll be the end."

Behind us a lorry driver lumbered into the cafe, the waxy flesh of his back mooning between sweatshirt and jeans. He sat at a table by the counter.

"The finality is the thing that makes us afraid, not family."

When the coffees were drained, we parted company. No arrangements were made to meet again, nothing was said. The final surrender would be the next night.

I walked slowly through the lamplit streets, my skin a riddle of lines. By turns I felt angry and sad, desperate and alone. These emotions circled the figure of Ann like saints around a madonna. What I'd expected to find in her, I'm not sure, perhaps a long-lost sister returning to the fold. But she was too strong and too aware of reality to become engrossed in my silly game of Happy Families. She knew the danger in denying what I secretly knew. But still I could not bring myself to dismiss altogether the idea of a family reunion.

As I walked by the marina, I saw the open arms of my family captured angle for angle in the moorings, saw the paper faces of my parents littering the pavement. So I, like Ann, had survived without them, but the idea returned again and again that maybe,

back in the fold, life might not be just about surviving; it might be about living. The water was calm and black, light dancing on its surface like sickle moons. Overhead the sounds of distant cars and tethered boats mixed with drunken voices from the marina pubs.

My hands toyed with a discarded bottle, catching the light in its brown glass. The grit around its neck I wiped on my sleeve, the label I smoothed with my fingers. Cautiously I placed it to my lips and spoke into the dark interior. The words distorted, each sound bestowing new organs into the fragile shell. When I finished, I held it up, said, "Sister Ann!" and cast it into the water below.

* * *

We met the following evening without greeting by the wall. The sickness had been very bad that day and I had been forced to stay in the boat where I had slept the night before. I felt afraid, cold, ill.

"You're later than usual," she said.

I shrugged. "I had to say goodbye to Baxter. He's been really nice to me."

She smiled.

"Then I took a walk through the park and wondered whether to hitch."

"Where to?"

"Anywhere." I turned to look at the house. The light was burning as ever. Ann began to walk.

"You'd come back in the end," she said. "You'd have to. Sooner or later the pain would get too much and the dreams too bad."

"I know."

She stepped into the road. My heart began to pound, fists against cage bars.

"Couldn't we wait just a little more?"

"No." She crossed, almost outside the house, almost opposite Three-nine-seven. My eyes flickered nervously between her and the window. Step after step she moved away, like a bottle tumbling into the current, her slender frame drawing ever closer to the brickwork of the house.

I cried out, ran after her. "Oh shit, Ann. I'm so scared."

She smiled whimsically. "I thought

this was the big family reunion?"

I didn't know. My body felt cold and almost numb with fear. The sickness was close and I could remember vividly the Kodachrome faces of my bottle family ranged so cruelly around me like judge, jury and prosecution. Beside me, Ann's face mooned up at the sooted facade of the terrace as she stepped onto the porch. Her arm extended to ring the bell.

"Ann," I whispered, "couldn't we leave this until another night?"

She shook her head, teeth clenched.

"Please!"

The bell rang somewhere inside the house.

* * *

Which brings me to now. Now I am inside the house and wait for what has been described as "Processing". Ann lies beside me. We have had our legs broken. When I ask about my family they laugh at me and compliment each other and whisper:

"Where were these units tested?"

"I'm not certain."

"On Gahimana?"

"There's no way of knowing without referring them to Register."

"Of course, even if they were, these traces should have been erased. It could colour the other data."

"I am aware of that."

"We will have to examine the data very closely."

"Expert cross-referencing and filtering."

So I wait. And think of my glass and paper family. I think of Corinne. I think of Baxter and of alien sums. Looking at Ann's shattered bones, I think of Baxter's research. Is it possible when he has completed it, that the fruits of his labour will be much the same as a person he once spoke to in the park and invited to stay under his roof?

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IN THE GARDEN

The Earth was reflected in her tears as he held her; it shone down into the little glade; all white and blue and green and seemingly untroubled. They lay together under its gaze as the body of the Moon swung them round, and the rest of the sky was the eerie quiet of the stars.

"There's nothing like Earth light... nothing like Earth," he sighed, "So hard to believe it's dying."

"We all die eventually," She replied and closed her eyes on it all, closed those eyes - and how I wish I could be like him; the trees around me are shaking; as if they want to cry with me when I realise that she reminds me of my long, dead wife, left behind on Earth... Looking at her again brings it all back in a flood, and at the heart of it all there is fire, which is somehow at the heart of all my memories. It is not good to have such things on your mind, so I try to forget, I leave the glade and go back to tending my garden.

I am proud of my garden; they all come here to pass the time between the close hell of the work-shifts and the thick sleep of the night-hours, and they regain the life they have lost as they rest under the eyes of Earth, the only mother they have. Poor old orphans of the vst. I have to look after them as well as the garden; as the sun's violent light peers over the horizon, I tint the Dome until it is as blue as the skies of my childhood. This is for my benefit as well; the sight of that naked Sun makes me uneasy, somewhere at the back of my mind.

Keep it there, shove it to the back... Don't think, work instead, it is time to let the rain fall, time to activate the mechanisms in the Dome that release the water... Wash it all away... After an hour's gentle shower little spheres of moisture cover the lawns with a grey-glowing down, and drip slowly from the trees; the air is sweet-smelling, and I can rest.

Sitting by the lake and watching the first natural children of the

settlement play, I know that I am the luckiest man alive. Because I remember those last days of the early moon-bases, when the system broke down, and all the claustrophobia and uncertainty and unease hit their peak... and I can compare that with what I have now, in the days of my retirement. And I am better off than my contemporaries; not for me the stinking air of Earth, or the hot and crowded corridors, the crippling work-shifts that survive even in these modern Domes. Instead I tend life, and they all love me for it here, because they need this garden, my garden; they need me.

I've earned it, what I've got now, I earned it flying those ships across the cruel emptiness time and again, I put up with the loneliness, endured the vacuum to keep those bases fed while the crisis threatened to kill them all; I brought some of the material for the first of these new Domes. We all earned it, but I'm the only one of those pilots still alive, it killed all the rest of them. There are times when memories make me wish I had died, when I close my eyes and I'm back in that cockpit... But it wasn't the emptiness, it wasn't the void, it was the longing, the having to look back at Earth, and to know home was so far away, that I might never return to it alive. And to know that on that shrinking globe was my town and my house and my wife, that was the worst part... Oh, Christ, I missed her, that was where the fire and pain and longing came from. And then she died while I was on my way back, stuck ten thousand miles above her, I'd been away all the time she'd been ill, hadn't seen her for months, wasn't there when she needed me most and now I'd never see her again. I swore that would be the last time space would hurt me and finished after that trip. But my Earth was sick, it was dying, and so I couldn't bear to stay there; I came here to try and resurrect it in my garden.

Ah, it is stupid to think back like this, it is all so bad and it is best



to avoid bad memories...I should keep my mind here and now, the luckiest man alive, get rid of dead things...But from the past dreams of fire and pain, and I am always fighting against them...let it rain, let the air be sweet.

The lake is getting choppy, worryingly so; there are waves that rise up and break the surface tension, throwing up clouds of water; clouds of water like steam, boiling out into space to become ice, forever falling. I find the controls, increase the gravity of the water and all is calm; now I must calm myself.

* * *

The couple I saw in the glade have been hiding in the little resting house by the lake, sheltering from the rain; it is their sleep period now, and they are hurrying across the lawn to the exit, back to their cramped quarter buried under the Lunar surface. She has an eerie, moon like beauty; her thin white dress wisps around her and I am a child again, staring from my window on Earth at the clouds blowing across that silver ghost in the sky. Ahhh, let the breeze blow the clouds away...watching, an old man's only pleasure. She is the finest flower in my garden and I love her; that is a good man she is with, and that is how it should be.

I like things in their proper place.

* * *

Last week they finished building the extension to the Dome, reaching out into the foothills with a great canopy; my garden will grow. It is night now as I roam the area; I feel as if I am in a dream, strolling out across the moon like this, with the emptiness above, the shadows on the crumpled faces of the mountains, the dusty soil swirling slowly up around me as I pass and falling softly behind me, like sand in the glass snow-storm I played with as a child, back on Earth. It seems unreal, I do not feel as if I can be sure that any of it is here, or even if I myself am really here. I would pinch myself, but I am afraid to spoil the illusion.

But no, the stars singing silent overhead, they are there, and when I

activate the lights set into the Dome the landscape is thrown into sharp reality. The valley in which I stand is like a palace; this moon is beautiful enough as it is...only the people here want a living Earth, not a dead moon.

And the unreal comes back; I imagine I see her dancing in this wilderness, the starlight on her flesh, and I feel my blood flow and then the fire and pain are back, as everything that was my life takes me back to the centre....

I cry and leave before sunrise.

* * *

They are walking to the glade again, and there is something in me that wants to follow, this infatuation worries me, I am frightened of becoming a voyeur, a dirty old man. Pushing it all to the back of my mind, I set to my work, clearing dead and rotting plants from the lake and testing the condition of the water. But from the trees I hear shouts, her voice raised in argument to a near scream, and I drop my work, I am running. I have to be sure that all is well, that everything is in its place, that is why I hide in the undergrowth, watching them. He is sat facing me, naked and confused, his head bowed with the weight of a frown, whilst she is half dressed, with her back to us both, staring off moodily into the trees.

"Why am I a lunatic," she snaps, anger cutting through her voice.

"You talk like one of the Children."

"So? We're from the moon...why shouldn't we love it as home?"

"No reason! But it's more than that..."

"Then why shouldn't we go out there?"

"It just isn't right-it isn't safe," he protests, sounding almost desperate. As if the world has ridden out of his control, as if she is slipping out of his grasp.

"But the cars are perfectly safe." She is trying to force a reasonable tone into her voice.

"And what if it breaks down? We'd be completely stranded!"

"Then they'll come and get us."

He curses, pulling on his shirt in short, angry movements. "Now you are

insane, d'you think we'd ever get away with that? No-one is allowed to leave the Dome without a damn good reason and your cloudy-head idea of a dirty day-trip isn't!"

I move round so that I can see her, the light on her face and neck and breasts, and I know that she truly is a child of this place, and that she knows it too. Why shouldn't she want to go out into the wilderness? She and those Lunar seas have the same beauty, and that is how she makes the garden so perfect.

"I don't have time to argue," he says, a rough tremor in his voice, "I start my work-shift in an hour." He pulls on his trousers.

"Then I'll go with someone else."

He looks at her. "Christ...sometimes I think you would."

He passes within an inch of me on his way out of the glade, branches snapping back into my head in his wake as I stare up at him. I'd caught a final glimpse of his face...the desperation and confusion have been replaced by a look of total loss...

Loss, that's a feeling I know too well, and after so many years living with it I just want to rest in a secure place; I need order, stability, and the two of them, happy and perfect together, are a part of that, they give me faith that all is well, a faith in life and all I believe in. They belong together, and I feel a need to keep them that way, so strong it threatens to drive all else out. If only I could!

Why am I so obsessed by them? It is a serious problem now because I have work to do, away from the garden; I have to spend a week away at least, finalizing the plans for the new area. And as I leave the garden to my assistants I see him stood by the lake on his own; I feel a tug at my heart as I leave.

* * * * *

The head of the settlement is sat in the room, staring at a relief map of the proposed area while he waits for me. I glance at it over his shoulder; a slice of Earth, put here on the Moon.

"It'll cost a fortune," I mutter.

He nods, "More than we could ever

manage; but Earth are so desperate to have a bit of their Mother Nature kept safe...they'll help us all the way. And we need it; it keeps us all sane."

"It keeps me sane," I hear my voice say. From somewhere.

He looks at me strangely, at that; there is something in that look I do not understand, just as there was something in my own voice.

"Good," he says, after a pause, "I'm glad you're alright...But then I don't think you're a problem. What worries me is that weird cult, the Children of The Moon, they call themselves. They are a problem, there's a madness can come in space, you know-I'm sure you must understand it yourself..."

Oh, I understand.

"Being cut off from the mass of humanity...They feel closer to the Moon itself than they do to the settlement, or to us, or to each other. Maybe your work here will help, discourage it. You must understand that very well, an old survivor like you."

That look again.

* * *

I understand the Children of the Moon as I stand out in the wilderness, and it stretches all around me, so fine...I hardly want to work, the pictures in my head are so unwelcome. But I visualise it all regardless; here, the pumps for the steam will be buried, deep in the rocks, and there the waterfall will make its descent, slow as ecstasy; on the plain below, more woodland, meeting up with stretches already planted in the main Dome. And a meadow, I suddenly decide, with long grass and flowers, like I remember from Earth long ago, a life ago. Yes, it will be beautiful, but as I stare across the empty moonscape I wonder, will it be the right beauty?

* * * * *

Sleep is torn apart by dreams of fire and pain, and even while I lie awake flames dance before my eyes-propheying something? Perhaps something is going to happen; the thought keeps me from my work and I end up wandering the wilderness under the canopy and staring into the gulf

above; but even there I find fire, worse than ever, the worst heat of all and a scar, deep inside me.

And so the work is made into a struggle and I eventually spend an extra week on it, plagued by dizziness and fatigue and by thoughts of her, in my garden. Two weeks I am away and it feels like forever-and when I return it is worse; I see her crossing to the trees, arm in arm with a stranger. Deep inside me the whole world feels wrong, as if a piece of me moved out of place is now gone forever...Or am I wrong, am I mistaken?-I have to know, and so this time I follow and find them making love, and hear her moan like heaven, see her mouth over his shoulder, like fire...

* * *

...fire tears through my body, oh, I want the fire, welcome it with open

arms but it is wrong to take the flame I've known that before and I fight it screaming and falling and a memory of flames before I pass out.

* * *

Through a window Earth turns serene, and it carries my wife, my dear wife's grave round with it; oh, I never saw you before you died, I was never there to help you and hold you safe. Instead I was stuck out in cold, hard vacuum and it hurt me so much I had to die, I tried to die, in my frenzy I set off flames and the whole cockpit was alight but somehow I knew it was wrong to take the flame, Knew I had to continue and carry my dead with me.

Now, like then, I'm in the hospital, trapped in metal forever, cut off from the flesh forever, like in space, and I see my steel body in the mirror and remember the smell of my burning body,



remember watching its cremation after the operation that left me a machine, and I am back aboard the ship with the heat and pain as I claw my way into the space-suit, seal myself in and open the hatches, let the nothing in to kill the flames.

Now I remember. Now I know.

* * *

They'd built a system so my soul could flow through circuits in every inch of the garden, along tracks laid in the wilderness, and never knew my mind had gone. And now I tear through it all like wildfire, for now I know and cannot bear it; all the things that were my life, sex and sunlight and cold space are just a memory of fire and pain, and the life I have is no life; I am dead.

* * *

The waves of the lake rage and batter the jetty on its shore, batter the resting house, soak the lawns, turn soil to mud; the rain falls fit to drown the whole moon, the trees are shaking and losing their leaves, and I am dead and she is gone, her ex-lover who loves her still is crying as he searches for her, I can hear his frantic, weep and moan above my storm.

And they pull me out again and pump me full of electric drugs and the rain stops and the lake subsides; the last sound I hear is the robots raking leaves.

And then I'm awake again; but just as I've been sealed off from the living warmth, so now they've sealed me out of my system, out of my garden; forced to walk in the clumsy steel body they built for me and it is not the same. Now I stand here in the glade, waiting for her to return, listening to cries from all over the garden, the search parties looking for her, the purr of the machines dredging the lake. If only I could cry, stood here where she was last seen, in the place she made her own, if only I could cry and lose the fire, drown it in my tears and lose the visions of her dancing in the wilderness, of the Earth and all I have lost, of my body burning in the emptiness...

* * *

I know where she is.

The entrance to the extended canopy is open, somehow she got through, probably in the confusion of my breakdown. I see her footprints stretching out and disappearing where the ground gets hard, and I follow, up past the barges loaded with soil, ready to be strewn across the landscape, up into the boulders and foothills. I find her staring up through the Dome at the stars and know that she is no human, she is born of this place, her eyes gray and her hair like a haze of stars, eerie and dead.

Despite her heated overall, she is shivering; I had thought of that, I have brought a coat for her. She takes it gratefully, puts it on, watches me, knows me.

"You are the gardener." A smile.

My metal voice laughs. "And you are part of my garden."

The smile disappears, like ice melting.

"Why do you all think you own me? I belong here, I am part of this garden, a dead place. I do as I please, I am free."

"Free and dead? I'm trapped, but I died long ago, out there, in fire." My steel arm points. "Now I am in charge of life."

She sighs, "This place is more beautiful."

"I am to destroy this place; it is, as you say, dead, and my business is with other things. Look!" And I point to the barges below us, "some of the last healthy soil from Earth. We are to expand the garden."

She sits on a rock, cradling her head in her hands. "How sad. We should leave this place as it is."

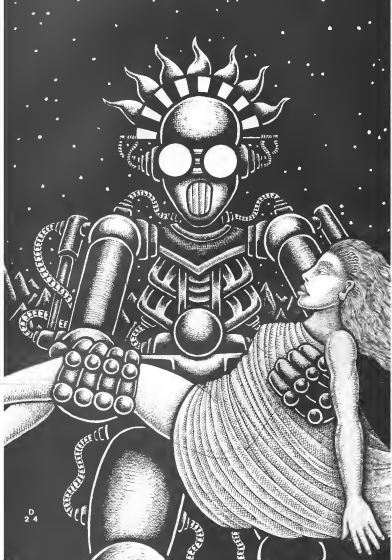
I stare into her eyes; they are beautiful, but there is no life in there, no light; they are like this wraith of a moon in the night sky, not the warm, breathing Earth of my memories. My wife was not beautiful, but she was alive, and this woman is like her dead counterpart.

"You do belong here," I say.

The smile again, which makes her face colder, more austere, somehow.

"Where else can I belong?"

She hugs herself for warmth, but I doubt there is any warmth in her, if she is capable of human warmth at all. Am I any more, especially now, locked in this thing? Taking a walk with her



further up and away from all those people back there, I feel disappointed; I'd idolised her as warmth, as the life I'd lost, but all that happens now that I am with her is that we walk away from living.

Strangers we are, outsiders. And to each other, also; we have total understanding, total knowledge of one another, yet there is no intimacy.

"Damn it!" My voice grates and I turn back, past the barges, back down to the garden.

"Wait!" She is running after me, "Let's go further."

"You'll be in enough trouble as it is; they've turned the whole bloody settlement over looking for you."

"I don't care about them."

"You've still got to do as they s..."

"I don't care about their rules, what they say, or do!"

I stop. "And what do you care about?"

* * *

Back inside, he shouts out with relief and runs to her; but she just walks by, ignores him, ignores them all, treats their authority with contempt.

* * *

Who cares about rules? I never used to, I remember as I spin the moon-car around a boulder.

"Lot of debris around here; we'll have to watch out."

Her eyes gleam. "This is wonderful."

Practically her first words since we left; god, I need them, get rid of the silence...oh, keep talking! I'm handling this car well, my old instincts still there, but they bring too much with them that is unwelcome. Piloting a machine through a vacuum again...Oh, talk! Talk!

But all she says is, "Stop here," and so here we are, in silence and an unearthly, unnatural pain.

Silence like a roar of flames...Talk!

I look at her and feel a longing...if only I was flesh, if only she were Earthborn...God, I hate this; a brain trapped in a tincan, impotent and rotting.

"Touch me," she says and I undress her, slide my steel hands over her and into her and she sighs, but I feel nothing, not even in my mind.

I wish I'd died, out there in fire.

* * *

I looked at my corpse through glass eyes; my scorched, scarred face might once have been handsome; it was now an obscenity to me.

"Finish it," I said, "burn the rest of it."

Get rid of the dead, get rid of the fire, get rid of the past, get rid of the ghosts; that consumed my mind, made me lock it all away.

* * *

I let her watch as they dumped the soil over the rocks, in the gorges, on the cliff tops, across the hillsides. She cried, I think, to see the bulldozers moving across that sad, desolate lunar sea; in a year it will be green and living; a river will fall off those cliffs in a gorgeous, ballistic movement; men will climb those rocks and look down into a gorge or out over the forest. But I have my doubts, still, I have some affinity with the dead, I am dead myself...But it is for the best, and all across the rest of the moon there is wilderness enough.

And that, I decide as I dump her naked body out of the car, is where she belongs. I step out after her, seal the door behind me, and wrap the veil around her like a cloud. I will carry her to the mountains and hurl her from the top, send her floating, her dress whispering about her forever.

Angel, you will be happy there, and more alive than ever before; indeed I swear I saw you smile as I opened the door and froze your last breath within you, swear you welcomed it as much as I enjoyed it. Drift away, my love...

And then it is time to tend my garden; there is a whole new area to seed.

Miles C. Hadfield lives in Southport, Merseyside, having recently finished his finals at Oxford university. His poetry has previously appeared in WORKS and further work has been accepted by AUGURIES. He was also featured in issue #1 of EXUBERANCE.

BLEACHED

Standing by the canal edge looking in, she hardly recognised the reflection that stared back; distorted by a dry breeze its sadness stayed, self evident. A small tear ran down her dirty cheek leaving a clean path for the others that would so surely follow. In her eyes a myriad of feelings were reflected; behind them the thoughts, so many and contrary that she couldn't be sure of anything anymore. Like a young dog going round in endless circles trying to grasp its tail, Dawn would never, or could ever, grab a cogitable thought.

Thinking back was easy though, it was only a matter of hours to the beginning when everything had seemed perfectly alright.

It was hot, far too hot. That damned, damned...

* * *

...HEAT. That was her first thought this morning, as it had been for the past many mornings.

The sun shone and cracked the roads, melted the tarmac and stole the water. It was a Monday or Tuesday, doesn't really matter which, if it wasn't for the labelling you couldn't tell them apart. The common denominators: a cloudless aurora of sky that as the day aged became an almost sapphire blue, with its sulphurous morning sun rising to fulfil the veiled threats of day.

Looking out of her bedroom window Dawn's second thought was of a more mixed nature, accompanied by a feeling that she couldn't quite pin down. For a moment disorientated, she lent on the back of an old wicker-chair kept near the window; it creaked and protested - a familiar sound. The street that she knew so well was, for want of a better word, different. Nothing tangible, nothing that she could put a finger on, but nonetheless different. The feeling was gone as quickly as it came.

The wafting arm of a hot breeze picked up pieces of litter as it

rolled down the street; a ragged page from some newspaper stuck momentarily to her window, flashing its headline of prolonged drought, then carried on. She watched as, kept aloft by warm air currents, it danced and shimmied lazily away.

Turning on the radio she was greeted by the static throes of galaxies far, and storms from continents distant, all manner of things making up the usual crackle and whine. She turned the knob but got nothing. This was the third day that she hadn't been able to find a station. Several of her friend's radios were unable to find stations as well; she wondered if it was the heat frying the insides or something. She decided she'd have to take it in to be fixed. When she turned it off the silence hummed for a second or so.

She felt hot and sticky: she needed a shower. Downstairs she could hear her father, Tom, moving about with his customary grace. Feeling guilty about how much water she would use, she decided against it, got dressed, and went down for breakfast.

When she entered the kitchen her father was standing with his back to her, a silhouette at the kitchen window.

"Lovely day," he said.

"Sure is," she replied getting a bowl for an appetite she was soon to lose.

Closing the cabinet door she turned to him. "Oh, by the way Da..."

He turned and she lost it, along with the sentence and bowl.

For a long second she could have sworn that it wasn't her father. The close-cropped black hair was wrong, the way he stood, his face, his height, his... Suddenly, in a blink, it all fell back into place. What a fool! Looking down she saw the remnants of the bowl, scattered.

"Whoops," he exclaimed, "better clean it up before your mother comes down."

She bent down to pick up the pieces and thought that she could always blame the breakage on her brother.

* * *

She takes a photograph out of her coat pocket, hoping to cauterize the wound of recent memory, and forces herself to look at it. Familiarity hitting her she looks upwards, her face a dirty mask made clean by the sharp edged moon, and cries out. She clenches her fists until the nails draw blood; but it's no good. The barrier breaks and the tears come. Her hand opens and the crumpled photograph drops to the ground to roll over the edge into the canal. Once afloat and drifting it becomes just another piece of litter.

* * *

She was glad, by the time she had forced some breakfast down, to get out of the house. For some reason she hadn't felt very comfortable sitting across from her father.

Outside, the early morning gossamer haze hung in the air like a vast net curtain, subduing the heat, yet after only ten minutes Dawn wished that she had set off to work by bus. The sweat an adhesive, her clothes had formed a second skin.

To escape the closeness she detoured into a park. Once among the trees her pace eased, the shade a sanctuary. Not caring if she was late she took the time to stroll, and spotting a bench up ahead she walked towards it. Rays of pale amber shone through holes in the canopy above, casting warm spotlights for the creatures to perform in.

A memory eased upon her, a recollection of when she was a child, and she remembered how special the park was to her. It was a place that she could run wild in with her friends and do whatever she had wanted. Strolling here over twenty years later she felt the same kind of safety and freedom. Nothing, she was one hundred percent sure, nothing at all violent or horrible could ever happen in this park. It seemed to her to be away from the real world, just slightly, yet enough to make a difference. An oasis of calm.

Reaching the bench she sat; cold to the touch, its wrought-iron frame was reassuring. A thing of reassurance was

valuable indeed. The world, she mused, had turned insane. She thought that all the values seemed to have been plundered and a false set of cheaper ones brought in.

Reform, such as charity, though, should perhaps start at home. Her elderly neighbour had been mercilessly beaten for a pittance. The attack had all the hallmarks of the Mafia, yet they were only school children.

Thinking of these things got you nowhere. After all what could she do with a prostituted world that was selling itself from one base thrill to another. Its bastard children the third world countries. Famine and civil war being their growing pains: useless, for they never grew.

Thinking of these things got her nowhere.

In the distance a dog could be heard barking, followed by a faint, angry shouting. Time to get back to work she thought, forcing herself to rise. As she rose, a fine dust was created that floated away on the calm air of the park, the notes glistening as precious things when glanced upon by sunlight. This small, slow spectacle was not for her to see. The hot breath of day enveloped her as she left the park, sweat pricked to the surface.

Arriving at the shop she worked at, Dawn found that it wasn't open yet. Putting her hands up to the window to create shade, she peered in. The dark interior peered back. She turned around and shielded her eyes against the glare from the shop fronts across the road. The sun must be behind me, she thought. Stepping aside from the sharp whiteness she looked further down the street. One or two shops were open but the majority were closed. What time was it? Looking at her watch she found only a band of light skin.

Where was everybody?

Her head started to ache from the relentless heat. It felt like one of those bulging lumps in the cartoons that grow bright red and throb at an amazing rate. It felt twice its size. It was funny but since she had gotten up this morning she had had the strangest feeling of, well, she couldn't quite say. She got the impression that today, for some unknown reason, was going to be different. That something incalculable

had leaned in and started a reaction. She couldn't say why, she just felt it. She was hot and alone.

Somebody should be here!

She felt as though the sun was bleaching her bones.

To hell with it then, after all it wasn't her fault that there was nobody here! She hadn't felt like working today anyway! She set off back home, this time by bus; the idea of a paracetamol with a cool drink, in a cool room being a powerful incentive. Before she knew it her stop beckoned and stepping off she felt as though she were entering into a photograph from which the sun had drained all colour. Walking from the stop to her house she could feel the heat from the concrete through the soles of her shoes. It seemed to seep up as if her skin were a litmus paper, rising to soak her mind.

Her senses swam...

The breakfast bowl shattering with high notes, that grated like a sharp nail down a blackboard, friction screaming out.

The silhouette at the window diluting and changing, becoming clear and turning...

CLANK! The gate slammed behind her; before her the front door stood benignly staring out into the world. Once inside the house, it didn't take long for that somnambulist kidnapper, sleep, to sidle up on her.

* * *

She watched the slow progress of the crumpled photograph that she had dropped into the canal, and her mind wandered: the can; the wrought iron bench of municipal green; the heat; the tramp; the breakers in his bottle of whisky: all pieces of a puzzle that she wanted to solve but the complete form not within grasp, as if a part were missing.

Wiping sweat from her stained brow, she sighed. Maybe she'd thought to much about it?

Looking at the water in the canal, she longed for its cool easy silence, so much better than the bleached city.

* * *

Her sleep was singed with a hot

unease.

She awoke.

Hearing people in the house she stretched and rose, rubbing her eyes as she wandered into the passage. Looking through to the back she could see into the kitchen, and through the kitchen window into the garden. They were all there, sitting in the shade, talking. She went into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and took out a Diet Pepsi. As she stepped through the open doorway the sun embraced her, its hot grasp oppressive and tight. Pulling the ring tab on the Pepsi she took a long, hard swig. She put a hand to her mouth and belched, then turned towards her family...

Three strangers sat in the shade, man, woman, and boy.

The can fell to the ground, its contents fizzing as it jerkily spilled out. The ground grew dark where it spread.

The man rose and spoke her name with an unfamiliar voice. She backed away, kicking the can that had rolled empty of its life behind her. Each figure wore familiar clothes, but by wearing them did not become the right person. Surprise and shock hitting her, she felt the air grow heavy, her legs go weak.

In each face there was a shadow, a glimmer of something familiar, but the eyes, the hair, the mouth, the shape, the colour, the texture, the lines and spots and creases all differed; yet there was that glimmer and she thought she knew.

She thought she could sense who they were, but what she saw in the shade, in the garden of the house where she had grown up, were strangers.

The empty can clanked a hollow note as it hit brick.

She froze. Shapes of words formed on her lips but no body of air came forth to make them whole.

The man bent down and picked the rolling Pepsi can up. The woman's face showed concern; she came forward.

Repulsion broke the freeze and Dawn backed away into the kitchen. As she stood framed by the doorway, a word tried to escape.

The boy, the third and final figure, rose, to make the line complete. Next to him was the man, and stretching out an arm he reached for her, his fingers

brushing by her hand. Laughing, he tossed the can up into the air.

As it turned and spiralled, the word that she wished to shout and yell and scream pulled at its shackles. On the can's decent her gaze lowered and she saw that the man had one foot nearly in the doorway. The word was released, by a throat as tight as taut leather.

"No," she screamed out. And as the can bounced off the concrete she alarmed the door, cracking the glass, and splintering her view of their faces.

Running to the passage she grabbed her coat and on sad impulse a family photograph from its domain by the telephone. Once into the street her arms became pistons, pumping her legs as if the very devil himself were after her. Past staring people she ducked and dived, running, running, running. Looking back only once, she saw three figures standing by her gate. The man had an arm around the woman. She and the boy were pointing; their faces vague and distant, looked concerned, worried.

Who knows onto what compass she switched, but arriving at the park she thanked God for it. Finding a secluded part, she fell onto a bench, sitting as if all her ligaments had been cut.

Who were they?

What were they?

Monsters in familiar garb?

No, of course not; and anyway hadn't she answered her own question before asking it? Standing there in the garden hadn't she known who they were? A feeling that these people were her parents and brother, but if so why hadn't she recognised them? Had they Changed? Had she changed? And if it was change, then why just her parents, why not...

...A cog, albeit a shaky, slightly off-centre cog, turned.

She hadn't seen anybody she recognised in the street, at this time of day you always did. So...

Wait, wait, this idea was just plain crazy. Nobody had changed, she was letting the heat effect her mind. Was she going insane? If this mad idea were to be true then something would have had to have started it.

Such as...

Perhaps the heat was some kind of catalyst, or, no, wait! Hadn't she read somewhere, or someone told her,

that the Earth was slowly moving off its axis or orbit or something? Yes, and hadn't sh...

The ideas, so many, fell over each other to come to the fore. A mixture, a cocktail, an asylum of ideas. Shouting and screaming, they all wanted attention.

Dizzy and hot she felt as though the space that she sat in were folding up, with her in the middle to be crushed as a flower between the pages of a book. Head bowed and shoulders aching, she wept tears that fell lightly to the ground between her feet, leaving salt water blades of grass. Hearing a noise she looked up and saw a small figure dash out of a spotlight of sun. Had she missed something?

The empty circle of light faded and died. Looking up she saw a large cloud pass over, fat, black, and angry.

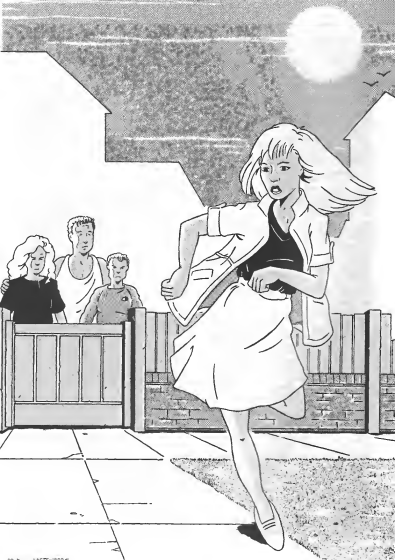
A movement to her left caught her eye, and as she watched the tramp shamble in her direction she saw something in his eyes. Closer, she noticed the almost-but-not-enough half-beard, stubby and stained. The broken veins in his cheeks made him look healthy yet racked at the same time. Closer still she recognised the something in his eyes, he seemed to recognise her.

Gripping the side of the bench Dawn watched repulsed, as coughing he spat a solid yellow bolt onto the path. She noticed that one side of his coat hung heavy, a large bottle of whisky rammed into its pocket. As he walked it swung from side to side, the liquid rising, then falling back onto itself. Breakers in a bottle of whisky.

Stepping right up to her he smiled, baring yellow-brown teeth.

"Hello again," he said, "I know I've asked before but could you spare something for a meal, you know, anything will do, I know it's a..."

AGAIN! AGAIN! AGAIN! The word burrowed deep into her, tore at her mind. Why! Oh why didn't she recognise him? She was terrified that if she didn't recognise him, then that meant that those crazy ideas of hers could be true. But reason dictated, or the little reason that she had left, that there must be another explanation. There must. Or was this the action and reaction that she had felt happening from this morning? The something



different that she had half been waiting for? She more than half believed it, and that was why she had been so wary and scared. She had felt on the edge of something all this morning.

She didn't know what, and she didn't know if she was just imagining it all.

He reached out, taking hold of her sleeve.

She backed away and for the second time that day ran as if the very Devil himself were behind her, hot on her heels. Perhaps he was.

Not knowing where to run, feeling the park had betrayed her, the jewel in her crown of thorns turned black to coal, she just ran. Falling several times, her feet racing faster than her mind, she got covered with dirt from the roads and paths that she dashed along. Not knowing and not caring how many hours had passed, by the time she sat exhausted at the water's edge it was dark.

Lying out, she stared into the night sky, her breath freezing in the air. The moon seemed to stand out, high up there amid all the darkness, so in contrast.

Light and dark.

Day and night.

Two sides of the same coin.

After a while, easing herself up, she walked to the water's edge. A breeze picked up and rippled her reflection, but even distorted the sadness was evident.

Only a day ago it had been normal, alright. Family and friends, places and people, everything alright. She wished to see them one more time so took the photograph, grabbed in pursuit, out of her coat pocket. Familiarity sprang out at her. This family photograph showed the family she knew and loved, not those strangers she had run from: the, the, the - desecrators sprang into her mind. Desecrators who had sat in her family's chairs in her family's back garden, in her family's house, in her family's street. Desecrators for the simple reason of being there.

But she thought she knew, knew something that just by thinking about it made you feel as though the top of your skull had been torn off.

Closing her fists, she cried out.

All the ideas and theories that she had, seemed to yell out to her all at

once. Her hand opened; the crumpled photograph dropped to the ground and rolled over the edge into the canal.

She thought back, trying to make some sense out of what she thought had happened, but knowing she never could. If some sort of change were taking place then she would just have to accept it. Have to accept that the sun had literally bleached all identity from her and everyone else, to leave a blank sheet. Like it did when you left a newspaper too long in the sun. It was such a terrible, forsaken world, that she said, "More power to it." Any change was probably for the best. But all the while she still wondered if it was only here that the heat had affected, not physically, but mentally.

Looking at the water she longed for its silence, its cool easy love. A love that would envelop and enter her, to hurt at first but take away finally all pain and sorrow, sense and feeling.

* * *

Her memories of the past events had finally caught up to the present. She wondered if she had thought too much about it, that it didn't alter anything, that she was still here, next to the canal. The rippling breeze ceased and the water reflected true images; seeing her own, her breath was stolen. Looking back was a terrified reflection of somebody else, a different 'her'. Feeling as though the whole universe were crowding around for a look, that the 'something' she had felt earlier was leaning in, so immense and incalculable that it condensed the air, crushing, that she backed away and looked upwards in a vain attempt to see it.

There was something definitely there. Something that blocked out all her senses. Something that she saw and couldn't fully take in; she passed out.

* * *

DAWN AWAK.

The smell of the grass this new virgin morning was so strong that you could float on it. The house that Dawn lived in, slept in; as did every other house. When the occupants finally



across, they did so with a cheer not seen for many a long year.

The mirror in the bedroom, in the house that Dawn lived in, didn't balk at the introduction of a new face, a stranger's face. 'Something different to look at' it probably would have thought, if it could have. Although, there was the shadow of something familiar in the smile.

DAWN A NEW.

Andy M. Smith lives in Darlington, Co. Durham. He is a regular contributor to the small press magazine scene, having appeared in *AUGURIES*, *WORKS*, *XENOS* and the *SCANNER*. His work is both contemporary and stylish, breaking the barriers of structured genre fiction. We will feature more of his work in the forthcoming issues.



Many thanks for issue #1 of *Ecuberance*. It was worth the wait: you've managed to put together a distinctive blend.

You make some interesting points in your editorial. I must admit I agree with you. The vehemence of the opinions against *Interzone* has often surprised me in the past; anyone reading some of the letters and editorials in the small press might think the best thing for society as a whole would be for *Interzone* to stop publication immediately! OK, it's true that as the biggest and most professional SF mag in UK, *Interzone* has an equivalent responsibility to its readers and writers. It's also true that the mag has at times come across as self-indulgent, prententious, patronising and irritating. But it has undoubtedly printed some of the best SF stories and writers currently around. And, in the end, can we really imagine

the british SF mag scene without *Interzone*? To me, we're better off in this country from the mag viewpoint right now than we have been for years; we have *Interzone* and we have a burgeoning small press. Something for everyone, surely? And for those who really can't stand *Interzone* for whatever reason, why worry? There's a simple answer: don't bother to read it!

David Vickery, Croydon.

Just read a copy of *Ecuberance* #1. Have to admit I didn't like it to start with but as I continued reading I found some worthwhile stuff. Your editorial, though, sounded suspiciously like a backlash against the *Science Fiction Underground*. I don't know whether this is your intention but the second paragraph suggests you are not

trying to push a new category of genre but want to provide another outlet for the existing stuff that has not received "the notice and attention it is duly justified."

OK. But watch out. Magazines like *B&B* and *The Edge* at least claim to provide an "alternative" to Mainstream/ *Interzone* fiction. That's their niche in the market. By relinquishing this claim you put yourself into direct competition with the mainstream and, as a relatively low budget/ low circulation magazine, you are likely to get second choice of stories. It's no surprise to find that the best story in the issue was by a known *Interzone* author. But would "The Activity of Mice" have made it into *Interzone* itself? As an alternative to the alternative you might find yourself as a pale imitation of the original. If you're not

offering anything different what have you got to offer at all? Why buy EXUBERANCE instead of Analog?

All the above would be just so much bullshit except for the fact that some of the stories in issue #1 read like rejects from a sixth form fanzine. I think it's great to encourage new writers by publishing them but to let established (even on a small scale) writers to get away with crap is not a good policy. You do then become a Fanzine pandering to the egos of these people. I can think of four stories in the first issue by people who, although published elsewhere, either can't write or are trying to fob off a gullible editor with their worst efforts.

OK snide, slag off mode over. Getting a long magazine out with lots of stories is an achievement. I look forward to the promise of future issues with guys like Andy Darlington in them.

Philip Jones, Surrey.

EDITOR REPLIES:

I'd like to clear up one point, my editorial was not meant to be a backlash against the S.F. Underground/Small Press. I hold great respect for both the editors and what they achieve. I am most definitely a fan of experimental fiction and indeed hope to include and push new and

challenging S.F.

The original intention of my editorial was to challenge the current trend, then, of the disputes and arguments between 'Big' and 'Small' magazines. It most certainly was not intended to continue this trend and was not directed against a single party. I simply wanted to question the point and value of such attacks. I for one can see no benefit or gain to such practices.

I'm sorry that you didn't enjoy all of the stories in #1, and hope that you find fiction to more of your taste in this issue.

Lastly and probably most importantly you question the aim of EXUBERANCE. Okay, so I have no rigid policy in regard to the type of fiction I publish, as say BBR- Experimental fiction, or say WORKS-Mood fiction, but I intend to publish and cater for a wide range of tastes. Please remember EXUBERANCE is not solely a S.F. magazine, it will always include Fantasy and Horror fiction, however diverse, and will include challenging fiction from all three genres.

I have outlined further aims and changes in this issues editorial. I would like to add that I hope EXUBERANCE will have a lively letters page and wish to thank you for your candid comments. I am always interested to hear what people think, so anyone out there I am listening.

Jason Smith, Editor.

First impressions are important, and I liked EXUBERANCE #1 the minute I took it out of the envelope. The black and white cover illustrations were singularly striking, and the interior artwork was of equal quality. Admittedly EXUBERANCE lacked the polished presentation of the better small press 'zines such as Dream and BBR, but for a first issue this will do just fine.

D.F. Lewis' stories are usually strong on imagery with negligible plot-lines, so "Misbegotten Love" came as a complete surprise to me, a most welcome one too. I enjoyed this short piece with its nasty sting in the tail very much.

"Surrogate" by Deborah Beard was the best story in this issue. With a nod of the head in the direction of "Alien" and "Rosemary's Baby" this story grabs the reader with a grip of steel and doesn't let go. Jeausica's harrowing plight chronicled in such gruesome detail makes for compulsive reading.

Peter Tennant, Thetford.

"Bad Taste" said everything I've wanted to say about the Horror genre in general...it's a long time since someone has been honest enough to point out that crappy low-budget Hammer Horrors with their type-cast actors manage to convey an atmosphere, suspense and unease

Continued on page 56.

GAME OF LIFE

In the wink of an eye, an entire universe came into being. A cosmos held together by mere enhanced thought, its nucleus a single man. A devoid history invented its own past, filled with fiction. It was all real, but none of it really existed.

* * *

The old man had sat in his chair, in the corner of the room, for over two days now. He was surrounded by memories, yet totally alone, unable to move, only minutes from death.

On the carpeted floor, at his feet, were several open photo albums displaying faded pictures. Pictures of him as a youth, pictures of him getting married, pictures of hellish holidays, pictures of different stages in his two sons' lives, and pictures of his children's children. A visual record of his spent life. He slowly, painfully lifted his gaze up from the albums to examine the room around him for the last time.

Everything familiar. Everything carried certain memories with it. Furniture, a hundred different people had sat on, the wood scratched, the material nearly thread bare. Ornaments, that his wife had bought while on holiday over the years, on shelves he had put up eighteen years ago. Wilting plants, that he had totally failed to keep alive and healthy since his wife's death last year. A colour television, that his eldest son had bought for him for Christmas three years back, that had been on for two days now, showing images of the world that he no longer felt part of. Flower patterned wallpaper, that had once been brilliant white, but now had a nicotine yellow background, bore the scars of age. A dirty window, that had been smashed over the years by a child's misaimed football and a money stealing burglar, framed an unkempt garden outside, that had been his wife's pride. A faded blue carpet, he and a friend, Bill, who had died of a

heart attack nine years back, had laid in '71, pock-marked around his seat with tiny cigarette burns.

Memories. Anything he looked at in the room sparked then off. He wanted to stand up, to touch, to hold everything in the room one final time, but he knew he could not. Even the slightest movement caused unbearable pain.

I'm a youth trapped in an old man's body, he thought to himself and laughed silently, but he knew it was a lie. He had seen too much, experienced far too much, to claim that to be the truth. He had lost the strong body of youth far too quickly, but he no longer thought as a youth. He was an old man. An old man trapped in a dying body. His eyelids felt heavy. He let then close over his eyes for what he knew was the last time.

He did not care that he was going to die in a couple of minutes. Alone, in the darkness, in silence. Inside his head he thought about how he had wasted his life.

When he had left school he had worked in a small shop for two years, then he had become an apprentice for two years at the local printers. Thirty five years and a world war later and he'd become shopfloor manager, and had known everything there was to know about the printing industry. Ten years later he had retired with a company pension that allowed for a little luxury in later life.

He had been born in this house over eighty years ago. Twenty four minutes past midnight. August the ninth, he had been pulled painfully into the world, kicking and screaming. He hated this house, despised it, as it had been his prison all his life. And he loved this house, as it was his life. Number 27, Edinburgh Road, a gray, bland, stone face in a row of bland, stone faces. He had lived in this house all his life and now, like his wife, he was to die here. He had felt that he had never got anywhere in his life, as if he had been in the same place all the time, here, nowhere.



He had not put enough effort into his school work, being much more interested in playing football, therefore he had not got the grades he should have. If he had tried just that little bit harder, he could have got a better job. A job with a better wage, better pension, and a better future. He could have paid for a proper education for his children and helped them to do something with their lives. He could have afforded to look after his parents in their old age, rather than being forced to put them in a rest home, where they had died. If he had taken the chance he had been offered, to join his little brother's business, he could be living in luxury in America, like he was. If he had not hassled his youngest son as a youth, trying to get him to do something positive with his life like his older brother, then perhaps he would visit him more than once a year, briefly at christmas, even though he only lived thirty miles away. If he had married the woman he had really loved, rather than the one who had loved him...

If he had done this. If he had not done that. Wasted chances, bad decisions. The things he had done in his past, to map his future, were done, and nothing could change them now.

If I knew then what I know now, he thought.

His existence had not been totally joyless, he just regretted what could have been and what he could have done if he had tried harder, pushed for it.

He had had his life.

You don't get a second chance, he thought bitterly. Do you?

Was there a God? He had been brought up to believe that there was, but he had never really been convinced. Before life there is nothing, after life there is nothing, that was all he believed. But, in this case he was totally wrong.

Suddenly images of the past collided in his head; scoring a winning goal, being beaten up at school by a gang of older kids, staring into the eyes of his wife and saying 'I do', shouting at his son for reasons forgotten. A massive chaotic collage of the past, fading. It was slipping away, like sand running through his fingers, his life disappearing. He knew it and let it.

The darkness behind his eyes deepened as death rushed to greet him. He could no longer feel the chair he sat in or the body he had inhabited. The darkness became complete. He felt nothing, thought nothing, was nothing, nowhere.

But death only lasted for an instant, and he became but a mass of null thoughts, drifting aimlessly through an endless absence of existence.

Then, over the horizon of oblivion, two words appeared and moved towards the mind. Etched on nothingness, they were: GAME OVER. They came closer, growing larger until they filled the consciousness's universe, then disappeared, dragging the abyss with them as the mind came back into being as a person.

An unfamiliar body enclosed the confused mind. Senses began to return.

First touch; he could feel the soft seat he sat in, the cool metal band on his forehead.

Then hearing...

"...may be temporarily disorientated for a few seconds."

Then smell; the raw smell of leather.

And lastly sight; and blackness was replaced by complete white.

The young man sat in the huge, synthetic leather, figure hugging seat in the small room. The seat was tilted so he was nearly horizontal, looking up at a bare white ceiling. To his right, hidden behind a gleaming metallic plate, was an A.I. computer, that had now finished scanning his brain's synapses matrix via the head band he wore. Feeding his neuro-system false information back via the band.

Motors beneath the seat quietly whined as it tipped forward.

"Please remove the head band and vacate the booth," the false voice of the machine said with an unnatural Texan twang.

He stood, brushing the band from his head with his hand. The wall in front of him dissolved into nothingness. The band fell to his seat. Nowhere else to move, he cautiously stepped forward.

Outside, he raised a hand to shield his eyes from the bright lighting. Once his eyes had adjusted he found himself standing in a vast concrete, dome shaped hall, lined along its curved walls with booths, similar to the one he had just left. The hall was full of people, who were mainly

youths, gathered around the booths, talking, laughing, carrying on as if all was normal.

He slowly examined the hall, his eyes tracing the arc of the building's structure, his mind racing.

Where the hell was he? Heaven? A group of three youths were walking over to meet him; one boy and girl, hand in hand, and another girl, all in their mid-teens. He stood dumbfounded as they approached.

"Didn't do too good then, eh!?" The boy said, a wide grin spreading across his face.

"Leave off, Mark," the girl on his arm said. "It was only his first go."

Not knowing what they meant by this, he looked at the other girl for an explanation, but none was offered. The lone girl just smiled. He looked back to the boy for help.

"Only twenty eight per cent success," Mark said with mock disappointment, looking up at the booth behind him.

He followed Mark's gaze to a

holographic screen mounted on top of the booth. On the screen was printed:

ALTERNATE REALITY

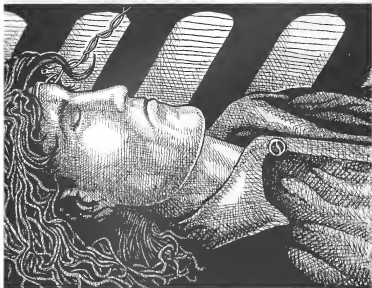
Live life to the full

Success 28%, Today's Top 89%

It did not make any sense to him and he let his gaze drop to the booth below. For a fraction of a second he caught sight of someone's reflection in the metallic surface covering the machine's brain. The reflection of a young man, tall and strong, wearing the latest label jeans and fashionably ripped synth-leather fly jacket, his long hair a wild mass of dark curls.

The old man looked at the reflection and knew it was his own. Now he understood. The world fell into place in his mind and he knew who he was, where he was; Grant Collen.

He was a seventeen year old student,



studying modern mathematics at one of Huston-Block's City-Techs. He lived back home with his parents on the plant, where his father engineered cattle. He had an elder brother who created Holo-Constructs for NASAUK in London-Block. He owned an Anti-Grav he still had ten payments left on. It was Saturday night and he was enjoying a night out with his girl friend and her friend, and her friend's boy friend. They were in a leisure arcade and he had just been playing an Alternate Reality game.

It all fell into place, and the life he had owned just minutes ago faded away like the memory of a dream does upon waking, the details decaying to leave the barest bones of what happened. But one past thought from the dream stayed strong: You don't get a second chance, do you?

"Looks like it's my go now," Mark said, as he moved towards the booth. Grant stepped forward to block him.

"I want to have another game. You can go after me." He turned and reentered the booth, not waiting for a reply and sat himself down in the huge chair. Servos whined quietly as the seat tilted backwards again.

"What are you going to be this time?" Mark asked. "Something more exciting, please! Barbarian? World War One fighter-pilot? A Sub-space trader?"

"No." Grant fitted the band around his head, brushing hair out of the way so that it made full contact with his forehead.

"Welcome to Alternate Reality. Get ready to live life to the full," the synth-voice of the machine uttered.

"I'm going to play the last game again." Grant called to his friends as the wall materialized in front of him.

"Except Better."

Stephen Fox was born in Thetford, Norfolk in 1971; "...and I haven't managed to escape yet." His first published story has recently appeared in Dementia 13. We understand that 'Game of Life' was his first written piece of fiction and we hope that it will be one of many. He has requested that we dedicate this story to: "Clare."

NIGHTFALL

A journal of weird fiction, horror, fantasy, science fiction, and the occult. Published by the Nightfall Society, 18 Kingsbourne Road, Sydney, NSW 1585. Subscriptions: £10.00 per annum (UK), £12.00 (overseas). Single copies: £2.00. Contributions: 1000 words, 3-4 illustrations. Send to: Nightfall, 18 Kingsbourne Road, Sydney, NSW 1585. Tel: 02 951 1234. Fax: 02 951 1235. Email: nightfall@nightsociety.org.au

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Tours Of The Black Clock - Steve Erickson - (Putura pbk - £4.50)

Steve Erickson's novels vividly highlight the inadequacy of labels - whilst his books aren't marketed as science fiction or fantasy, they nevertheless contain a consistently brilliant and unique vision both of the future and of the past. In Erickson's fiction reality is re-invented, history ceases to be fixed, and the world both is and isn't the world we know.

His debut, 'Days Between Stations' (Putura pbk - £4.50), introduced the reader to a landscape where sand storms blew through the streets of LA, where bicycle races were held along the dried up canals of Venice, and where the oceans had receded from the shore. If anything his imagination has become even more fertile and bizarre since, and the scope and daring of his fiction is virtually unequalled.

His third novel, 'Tours Of The Black Clock', takes the twentieth century as its setting, and is an alternative history of our age in which the stories of Hitler, of the Second World War, and of the whole century are re-invented. Erickson envisages the century as a 'tour' of the black clock', as told through

the eyes of Banning Jainlight, a writer of torrid sex fantasies for American pulp magazines whose stories find favour with a mysterious German known as Client Z. Banning soon finds himself tailoring his fantasies to this particular client's tastes, until eventually he is taken to Germany and installed as Hitler's official pornographer.

There Hitler has Banning write about his one true love, his niece Geli who died in suspicious circumstances in 1933, but Geli appears to different people at different times across the century and throughout the novel, and she is the spirit of Erickson's alternative history. Her mysterious presence represents the destiny of the century, as the black clock ticks down, and evil spreads across the world.

But here evil and good are not the black and whites with which we paint our own history, instead Erickson bravely presents Hitler in a sympathetic light - evil is the destiny of the century, and Hitler is only briefly its architect. Later, he comes to see his victim.

In this novel the war does not end in 1945, rather the Germans are successful in taking over Europe, and are locked in a virtually static conflict with

America. Hitler has become a weak and feeble old man - an embarrassment to the Germans, and an object of pity to others. Banning Jainlight boats him to punish him for his crimes, but in doing so, it is he who comes to seem evil in the eyes of others. Erickson brilliantly forces us to reconsider the nature of evil; as the century ticks down, he shows us that, finally, evil has no face.

It is virtually impossible to over praise this novel - here is imagination without restraint, prose which is almost erotic in its love of language, and a story which ranges across time and space and place to tell the whole alternative history of our century. 'Tours Of The Black Clock' is quite simply an awesome achievement.

Craig Turner.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I'd like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to the following people who helped and offered their support. To Andy Caines, who helped with the design. To Graham Evans, for encouragement and his assistance. And to Jackie Loten, who cared for a time. Thank you.

STARR NIGHT

"You don't rely on nothing out here Chyle, 'cept maybe the sun going down and coming back up again, but even that can catch you sometimes, catch you unawares."

The words of wisdom came flooding back until I remembered them as if they had been said that very morning. The night was cold and the Autumn wind had turned bad as the night had grown darker. Maybe it would snow. The sky loomed thick and sagging, its elusive texture hiding more than I could ever imagine.

But the moon was there and as I watched it, its serene mathematical shape hanging rigid from its invisible axis, I remembered Starr and the times we had spent on the streets together, now almost a lifetime ago.

A lump rose in my throat, and I swallowed hard, not quite able to rid my mouth of the bitter taste that sorrow bought with it. Starr had been a friend and living on the streets a good friend was as rare as an honest crook. Starr had shown me that maybe some things, which I had taken for granted ever since I was a young man, not always provided a reliable foundation for adulthood. But he had not been around long enough to teach me and for that I feel cheated. Maybe it was wrong. But good friends often die hard and Starr had been the best.

Maybe he always would be.

The sun was the only thing I could rely on now. At least that never let me down. Not like everyone else in my life, who had driven me out onto the streets, breaking my ambitions in two like a piece of rotted firewood.

But nothing is ever eternal. At least nothing we can touch or see.

Maybe Starr had been delirious? Life was eternal wasn't it?

I used to think so, but no more did I feel the calling of my faith. Sometimes things happen that stop you believing. Things which you can't explain or understand.

Like the things that happened the night Starr died?

Sometimes I shake my head in silent

denial when the question pops into my mind but deep down I know it to be the truth.

Yes just like that night.

Maybe seeing was believing. At least in the right context.

The night had been cold and hostile and in many ways reminded me of the weather back in England. The sky was cloudless and featureless, the stars no longer visible in the night, quenching the night of its natural splendour. All that remained was the moon, pale and sombre looking, its vast circumference giving off virtually no brightness.

The ground was dark, invisible almost to the naked eye and as we walked across it towards the town park, I was hardly aware that Starr was behind me, following me to this secret gathering in which there were to be only two members.

The ground seemed to be frictionless, my feet slipping over its damp surface giving the impression that it was not there at all, and that I was simply walking on air. The illusion was convincing, but on the whole impossible. At least that's what I believed until Starr showed me something that made me think otherwise. Something which forced me to change my whole way of thinking. Did I really want to be part of something that could change my whole way of thinking. Did I really want to be part of something that could change everything so drastically?

But that was assuming I had the power to choose.

Starr placed a warm hand on my shoulder as we reached the centre of the park. Here the wind seemed to roam freely, its form almost directionless.

"This this far enough?" Starr said softly out of the darkness. His voice sounded calm, but under it I sensed a kind of hidden excitement. I felt it myself, breathing and absorbing it until I began to tremble slightly.

Was it time? At last I believed that it was.

Starr sat softly on the grass and



motioned that I do likewise. The grass was warm considering the wind was so icy, and as I touched it, I swore that I felt it move. I looked up startled and Starr smiled, but his face registered no concern. Had he felt it too I wondered as he peered blindly into the night? I tried to push it out of my mind but couldn't. Perhaps that's why Starr had brought me here. I shivered, and pulled my coat even tighter around my waist although it was not the cold that had caused my discomfort.

It was something about the park, the atmosphere that seemed to pulse through the air like sea fog. The park was completely empty but I couldn't seem to rid myself of the feeling that we were not the only ones out there. Branches snapped, leaves rustled and for almost ten minutes I found myself spinning around at every squeak, afraid that someone would spoil whatever Starr was about to show me.

Starr however seemed unruffled by what was probably nothing more than the nocturnal scampering of the park's wildlife. I tried to relax, but a knot had twisted itself into my gut and I sat stiffly, watching Starr as he closed his eyes and relaxed, his breath becoming regulated and shallow.

I waited patiently, the strange ritual taking no more than a few moments. Then his eyes opened and he smiled again, maybe reassuring me that everything was alright. God knows I needed some reassurance.

"Bad deal, huh?"

I shrugged. "If you mean sitting in the middle of Coral park in the freezing cold, I've had worse."

"Maybe," he replied absently, "but if it gets to be too much, or you change your mind about this, your free to get up and walk away. You came of your own free will, but maybe you won't want to stay until the end."

He paused for a moment as if considering some last minute complication.

"Assuming that there is an end," he finished.

I nodded, not altogether certain to what I was agreeing with, the cold had begun to seep in through my gloves and my finger ends were already numb. I rubbed them together but the cold seems to have a firmer grasp on them and as I exhaled my breath turned to

white smoke which belled upwards before being lost in the darkness.

Starr must have noticed my discomfort as he removed his own coat and held it out.

"Take it," he said, his voice already wavering with the cold. I shook my head and pushed the garment away.

"Your catch you death if you sit there without a coat, it must be minus 5 out here."

He looked at me solemnly, his eyes strangely pale and haunted. If I hadn't known better I would have said that they were the eyes of a dying man.

"It's OK," he said calmly, "I'm not cold." He grinned, but the smile was stale and humourless, he threw the coat down beside him, insisting that he sat uncovered and although I looked at the coat longingly. It would have been like condemning him to death.

A cold northerly wind had risen up, peeling the coldness of the night up from off the ground and dragging it through the air where it bit and clawed at our faces. My ears burned more than than if someone had held a blow torch to them. The clouds began to dance sporadically, the wind whipping them into a wild frenzy until they skittered about overhead like skates on ice.

Starr sat quietly, his head bowed, his hands pressed together tightly as the weather changed and roared. His hair and clothing flapped dangerously and after a few minutes I feared that he was dead already. His body remained still, frozen by concentration and if it wasn't for the gentle rise of his chest and the occasional murmurings of his unmoving lips, I would have believed him to be long gone.

And then it happened.

The strangest thing.

The sky, now filled with an assortment of thick dark clouds, all brimming with bad intentions, seemed to fall from the sky. The cloying aroma of dirt became overpowering, encapsulating us in a blackness which blocked out the moonlight, the only source of light we had in the centre of the park.

All visibility was lost for a moment. I heard a scream and looked around me, but deep down I realised that the cry had exploded from within my own tight throat.

I groped for Starr, at first losing my bearings in the chaos which had suddenly erupted from seemingly nowhere. After a moments frantic search I grasped hold of his shirt and held on, waiting for the clouds to clear. His skin was cold beneath his shirt collar, icy cold and I began to fear the worst.

"Starr," I screamed through the maelstrom. A hand grabbed me from out of the blackness and I flinched before I saw Starr's face, calm and controlled, staring through the previously impenetrable air.

He placed his other finger on his lip, indicating that I should remain silent before he closed his eyes again and began to concentrate.

'If it gets too much...get up and walk away'

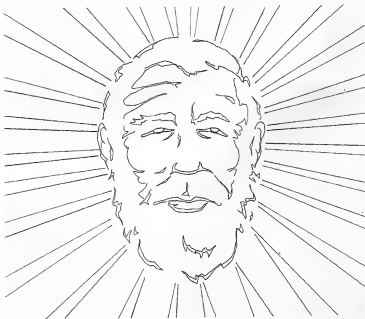
His words hung limply inside of me. I wanted to run, to get the hell out of

whatever I was apart of, but another part of me refused to leave Starr. Maybe loyalty had something to do with it. Or maybe it was some other darker trait which prevented my common sense from overcoming my sense of adventure.

Either way I stayed aware that something was happening but understanding nothing of its nature. I remember closing my eyes, my whitened knuckled hand still clutching at Starr's flapping shirt and I remember crying out my mother's name, time and time again, totally oblivious to the fact that she had died long ago.

The wind roared around my exposed face, lights flashed like fireworks, though where they came from or what they were I was too afraid to look.

I heard voices, young children's voices shouting from far away, their meanings distorted by the winds which blew fast and dangerous.



And then it stopped as quickly as it had begun.

I waited, my eyes still tightly closed.

Maybe I was dead?

I opened my eyes reluctantly, first one, then the other.

Nothing.

All around me was nothing. The grass was gone, trees were gone and in place of them there was an empty void which shone brightly. Starr opened his eyes also, his face still calm but there were strain lines around his cheeks and around his eyes. He blinked and looked around.

Nothing.

We were suspended in a room which had no walls, no floor and no view. Everything was so white. Starr smiled and I was just about to ask him where the hell we were, when from his trouser pocket he pulled a long, sharp edged knife. It shone in the brightness, gleaming like the sun glancing off a still lake. He looked at it thoughtfully before plunging it into his own stomach.

I screamed, flailing back away from him. Nothing broke my fall and I tipped backwards until I hung upside down. I heard a groan from behind me and then I heard Starr laughing, although his voice began to fade, getting softer and softer with every unearthly rattle.

I fell into the pit, my arms and legs spinning uselessly. Starr was no longer with me now, I was certain of that fact. But how would I get back? I pondered the idea as I fell, but my brain seemed disorientated, and I began to black out. I remember thinking that I was in heaven, that there was no other explanation for the phenomenon, when I lapsed into unconsciousness.

Then everything went black and I remembered no more.

The next thing that happened was that I awoke, back in the park, unhurt but severely shaken. My arms and legs were limp and jittery and I was barely able to experience any feeling in either for about five minutes. The park was much the same as when I had left it, the tall quivering grass whispering secretly in the wind which although was still strong had calmed from its earlier rampage. The night was dark but the shapes of the trees and the

children's swings could still be distinguished from the assortment of other silhouettes which rose out of the ground.

I was alone, Starr was no longer with me. Only his coat remained untouched, piled untidily where he had sat only minutes before. Was he dead? I remembered the clouds, the white room and the long knife which Starr had plunged into his own abdomen.

But that had been a dream surely?

Or had it?

It had all seemed real enough. It was just the fact that it had all seemed too impossible to be real, too goddamned ridiculous. I shivered and my whole body was racked with a wave which sent my teeth grinding together. Maybe I was going insane?

Three years on the streets sometimes did strange things to a man's mind, twisting it until he can no longer define what is real from what is fantasy. I had seen it before. Mainly in the State hostels back in the city. I never suspected it could happen to me, creeping up on me unawares until I was no longer able to control my own thoughts.

But I wasn't insane. In my heart I knew it, but in my mind I had no answers and that's what made it so scary. Knowing that there was no explanation and knowing that if I were to ever tell a soul they would smile and think I was crazy. People on the streets saw things like this every day, strange, hideous visions which they could no longer understand. That's what drove most of them to the bottle. That and loneliness.

I sat, engrossed in my own thoughts until the feeling returned to my limbs and I felt well enough to walk again. My bones were frozen under my flesh and felt brittle, as if they had been forged from ice.

A shadow fell upon the ground beside me. I sat back down. If it was the police there was no point in trying to run. In my present state I would have been fortunate to make it to my feet, never mind outdistancing a law man. So it sat waiting, hoping to god that it wasn't mugger or murderer.

"Chyle?" The words lifted through the air with a subdued sweetness that made me look around.

"Starr," I muttered under my breath, not completely sure that this wasn't

another part of the dream. I started dumbfounded at him, my mouth open in shock.

He smiled, a wicked, mischievous grin and laughed shortly.

"Who were you expecting? Adolf Hitler?"

I struggled to stand, my legs still half unconscious. Starr grabbed my arm and pulled me up and at last we stood face to face again, our eyes locked in a kind of crazy elation that was electrifying.

"Jesus Christ" I cried, my heart racing in my chest, "I thought you were dead." I reached out and embraced him, the weight that had sat in my stomach like a lead brick lifting gradually until I felt no more.

Maybe Starr had been more to me than just a friend? He was also family, not by blood maybe, but by circumstance and I felt the tears coming, thick and infinite as they fall down my face in torrents. "I really thought you were dead."

I grinned, a wide stupefied grin that I had difficulty suppressing, but immediately I knew something was wrong. Starr's face remained sad, reminiscent almost and I knew instinctively that what he was about to tell me I wouldn't like.

"I am dead," he replied solemnly and the happiness and relief suddenly fell stale. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting but I knew for sure that this wasn't it.

I frowned, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

"What do you mean you're dead?" I studied his face for a moment. It looked cold and icy. The features were the same as they had always been but his eyes were black and detached, unblinking like two stones behind his eyelids.

I began to laugh nervously, "This is a joke right?"

He shook his head. Something about his calmness was beginning to scare me. He seemed too relaxed, too sure of himself and I began to feel it was wrong. The whole thing was wrong but I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was.

"Not this time Chyle," he replied soberly, "This time is for real." He smiled and glided a little closer, "I told you that if you didn't like it you could get out, but you chose to

stay, and for that you saw everything."

I shook my head wearily.

"I didn't see anything," I said, my legs again feeling weak beneath me, "Nothing but a lot of bright lights and strange sounds. I was scared, I closed my eyes through most of it."

He turned eastward, it was then I noticed what it was that was bugging me about him. His feet no longer touched the floor, they sort of hovered inches above the ground. I looked unbelievably, but it was there before me.

Starr turned and noticed my horror.

"Ah, so you believe me," he said, a smirk rising to his pale face, "It's no big deal Chyle. It only hurts for a minute. But what's a minutes discomfort to an eternity of happiness." He smiled broadly and in it I saw a fragment of the old Starr.

"But it has to be kept a secret Chyle. No one else must know about this, no one but you and me."

"Who'd believe me anyway," I replied dully. My mind was blank. I had seen some strange things before sure, but nothing of this magnitude. This was the big one, the one unexplained thing that everybody is supposed to witness at least once in their lives.

"What exactly happened Starr?" I paused for a moment, no sure that I wanted to know the answer, "I mean what was the deal with the lights and the knife and all that weird stuff."

"It's a secret," He replied and for a moment I thought he would say no more, "but it's a secret I can tell you, you know most of it already."

I nodded, and he began to tell me his story, his speech slow and laboured, but gradually gathering momentum as he talked on.

"Years ago, a man called Edward Stone picked me up off the floor outside a hotel in the city. I was hungry, almost to the point of starvation and had been thrown out of the hotel for trying to steal food. I had been on the road for little more than a few weeks and was quickly finding that life was not as easy as I had first imagined.

I had nowhere to sleep, no money and no knowledge of what it took to survive. Ed Stone however had, and took me in for a few months, until I got my act together and during those

weeks he taught me more about his life on the road than any book could ever tell. He had lived there all his life and pretty well knew the ins and outs of how to get by."

Starr's eyes glinted dreamily, as if by some moment he was reliving the moment through the tale.

"Then one night he showed me something. At the time I met him he must of been close on eighty years old and the beginning of winter had come early that year. I guess he figured he was too old to last another year. The streets are a cold place in the winter, but I guess you know that already."

I nodded, my head aching dully as his words began to take effect and I began to wonder how old Starr really was. Surely not as old as Stone. But maybe it was possible. There was something behind his eyes, a hidden maturity that seemed to peer lazily out onto the world. Watching as if waiting for some great event to take place.

"Anyway that night he took me to Coral park. The night was cold and blustery and we struggled, freezing through the streets. Snow was about three inches deep on the ground, and by the looks of the sky there was a few more still to come.

Ed's breathing was getting gradually worse and on more than one occasion I found myself trying to talk him into turning back. The cold was no place for an old man at the best of times. He refused however and it seemed that no matter what I said he was determined to get there.

And get there we did, not many hours after dusk. The snow was beginning to fall again, lightly this time but it looked as though it would get worse before the night was done.

Both of us sat in the middle of the snow, our clothes already soaked through and for the first time since I left home I found myself wishing that I was back there, sitting in front of the log fire with my family, just like the old times. Neither of us spoke though why I never asked. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

So I sat, absorbed in watching the snow falling and the grey city streets turning from there normal slums to something that was magical. It was like christmas again, the rooftops

wrapped in soft white paper and the roads covered in a thick white crust, unmarked by footprints or tyre marks."

Starr paused for a moment, his eyes twinkling warmly at the memories and suddenly I could see the face of the child he had once been, the boy which came before the hard times and I felt my heart glow in tribute to my own childhood, which I had so brutally ended before it had time to flourish.

Then the thoughts were gone and he looked at me sadly, his face looking old and tired.

"Anyway, Ed seemed to mediate for a while, his old bearded face lost in a kind of self induced coma which lasted for several minutes. The air seemed to change in front of my eyes, becoming more dense as if the sky had rocked off its axis and plundered down to earth. The clouds were thick and choking. It was as if we were at the centre of a flameless inferno.

I began to feel dizzy, the blackness engulfing my lungs for a moment, when suddenly the smoke was gone and in its place a bright light, as powerful as the sun blazed furiously.

I opened my eyes, just in time to see Ed's spirit passing out of his body. I was captured, my face and body frozen with awe. Out of the body experiences were something I had read about, but never in my life expected to see. But there it was, happening less than a few feet before me and the strange thing was, when Ed's spirit left his body, the old man smiled as if at last he'd got something he'd always wanted.

I never forgot that smile Chyle. It was the same feeling of elation I experienced when my own body parted company with my eternal soul. To experience death is in a way to experience life. It's not the end, it's just the first part of being alive, the introduction if you like."

Starr stopped for a moment and I sat silently, absorbing his story with as much of an open mind as I could muster. It was a believable story, at least to someone like myself who'd seen most of it happening, but it was all so crazy. So damned insane that it was difficult to believe it was true.

But I had to believe it. Otherwise this would have all been for nothing. Starr's death would have been for nothing, and I would have rather died

than find no purpose to his death.

I nodded to Starr and he smiled, maybe relieved that I understood. It was the least I owed him. In a way Starr had been my own Edward Stone, picking me up from the gutter and teaching me the ways to survive. Maybe this whole thing was a re-enactment of the night that Starr had spent alone with Stone.

"So that's the whole story?" I asked at last. The wind seemed to have dropped and the night begun to feel a little milder than before.

"More or less," he said, "How do you feel?"

I shrugged. "Numb I guess and frightened."

He looked at me with surprise.

"Why?"

"Because now you've told me the full story I guess it's almost inevitable that the trend will carry on long after you go."

He watched solemnly, "And?"

I looked away.

"And I'm not sure that I want to die like that." I floundered, searching for a way to truly express my feelings, but I felt empty and dried out. "What if I just want to live and get old. Where does it leave me then?"

He laughed heartily, "Chyle my friend, you misunderstood me. The process only goes on if you so desire it to. No one can force you to do it against your own free will, not even God can do something like that."

I sighed, any doubts I had, had now gone.

"Thank God." I said aloud and Starr smiled, his face alight with some mystic force which seemed strangely becoming. Maybe as the years passed and I grew steadily older the choice to live and the choice to die painlessly would become a little easier to choose between. I wondered whether Starr had thought the same after Stone had showed him. Maybe. Who knows the secrets that dwell in a man's heart.

The park was silent, not even the wind could interrupt the moment of serenity that passed through my veins, though whether the silence was real or simply a figment of my stable imagination I could not tell and did not care to know. At last I felt good about something.

Starr began to fade then, his form losing its solidity and taking on a more transparent guise until he became almost invisible.

"Good luck Chyle," he said, his voice sounding empty and hollow and I tried to speak back but my emotions were so tangled I began to sob. His image at last disappeared and again I was left alone in the park which was somehow much less intimidating. The late dusk reminded me of a winter long ago, when I was still a child and immune from the worries and tribulations I had endured as an adult. Tears poured down my face for the first time since my grandfather died almost ten years ago. I was only a young boy then, but old enough to understand that I'd never see him again.

This time it was the same, the loss of a very dear friend.

I wanted to tell him that he didn't have to die, that things would get better if he just gave them time. Maybe even tell him that he was the best friend I'd ever had.

I wanted to, but I didn't.

I guess he knew those things already.

* * *

But that all happened over ten years ago, and although the details are a little hazy I still remember it like it happened yesterday and my thoughts and feelings for Starr have stayed with me ever since.

The night is freezing, maybe even colder than it had been all those years ago and I feel a strange urge to go to the park tonight. I'm not altogether sure why it seems so strong but I have a good idea.

Maybe this is the calling.

Harren is with me now, warming his hands on the small fire I've just made to keep us warm. It looks set to be another cold winter. The papers say it could be the coldest one over twenty years. Wouldn't that be around the time Edward Stone made good his appointment at Coral Park? I can't be sure but something inside of me tells me that I'm right.

'The process only goes on if you desire it to.'

Honest words from a good man.

But wrong. The process seems inevitable.



Maybe I'll go tonight.

"Another piece of bread Sir?"

Harren hands me what is left of the loaf he stole the day before. I take a piece and eat it hungrily, though it hardly touches the hunger which lies dormant in my stomach. Maybe it'll take more than food to satisfy such an urge. I smile.

"Let's walk," I hear myself saying and Harren stands and together we walk out into the bleak November night.

Paul Reed is 21 years old. He lives in a small village on the outskirts of Hartlepool. He has been writing since the age of 16 and is an avid reader of the macabre. He enjoys the work of Stephen King, Richard Laymon and Ray Bradbury. This is his first published story. We will feature more of his atmospheric fantasies in the near future.

Continued from page 40.

totally lacking in the loveless big-budget audience distancing goreshows of recent years.

Your editorial was interesting. Several points come to mind, however. In the first, Interzone's behaviour regarding the small press has been impeccable in all the time I have read it. Frequently they inform readers of new magazines, speak words of encouragement, even suggesting that continued improvement in some areas may mean serious rivalry one day. Their counter-attack on The Edge seemed quite justified in my view... "Experimental" stories are radical only if you've managed to ignore New Worlds, Dangerous Visions, William Burroughs, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and all the others who broke ground that doesn't need breaking again.

Another point is this: the best stories in the small press may be superior to the worst in the professional magazines, but it is rare-

ly, if ever, true that the best in the small press is better than the best in professional magazines.

The last point, a positive one, is that the likes of Interzone does not, because it can not, get away with producing stories which are "merely" well written and enjoyable. We need the small press for that - we need the small press for stories that are not heavyweight discourses on the human condition, but are simply entertaining diversions that might, in the process of diverting, make one stop and think...

Paul Beardsley, Havant.

Many thanks for the debut issue of EXUBERANCE. The size is good, the print easy on the eye. My only bitch is regarding the spelling mistakes and a few other typographical errors relating to things like full-stops and commas. Still, early days yet so I won't give them undue

critical emphasis.

Illustrations: Rarely do I see in any magazine artwork that grabs me by the balls. Most just seem to be space-fillers. In your case I liked the front and back covers and the artwork on pages 7, 20 and 52. Russell Morgan's illustration on page 18 is the best though, and I keep looking at it, seeing little details that passed me by on previous times. The faces seem vaguely familiar, the overall effect slightly haunting.

Your editorial made sense. There is far too much bitching, backbiting and general egoflexing within and without - the small press. I didn't think your words were particularly harsh though. Craig Turner's Bad Taste article also made sense, and no doubt voices the opinions of a lot of us. Horror films these days seem to lack substance, depth, and are in the main a boring load of garbage.

Paul Finn, Bristol.

ED MOODY'S LAST CASE

"Lady, that's a great body you're wearing."

She turned slightly, a kink in the smoke trail which drifted from the end of her lip.

"Yeah," she said. "And I'm keeping it on."

She looked him up and down. His face was ugly red, like a fresh bruise. She was wearing a Bogie-style thirties suit - gray, with arrow straight white pinstripes like lines of cocaine.

"Sure is a shame to keep it under wraps lady." He kept a black cigar clamped between his teeth, and spoke through clouds of dirty black smoke.

"That's the way I like it," she said, "but..." - she got in just before him - "let me guess, it's not the way you like it, right? Well..., shucks, mister."

She went back to cradling a dead glass on the bar.

"Lady, I'm used to girls doing what I like them to do. The name's Rico, Rico Moronie." He paused to let that sink in, like a couple of concrete boots in the Hudson. He gestured to the barman, "Pete, get me a drink for the lady."

The service was quick. The Martini was still shaking as it slid in slow motion across the bar top. So was the barman.

She just looked at it. "I never heard of you," she told him. "And the barman's called Steve."

Rico clicked his fingers, everything stopped, like a hypnotist putting time itself to sleep.

"Say kid, Pete's your name, ain't it?"

"That's right, sir."

"Good." He lingered Orson Welles-like on the word. It tasted sweet, his voice burnt honey.

"Ah, Jesus, who is this guy?" She spoke aloud to no one in particular. Then she turned back to Rico - "Say, what two bit dime store novel did you step out from anyway?"

"Same one you did, namn." He said.

Same one Francis Darwin was writing. His magnum opus. 'Ed Moody's Last Case'. Twenty-seven times Moody had been pitted against his arch rival Rico Moronie - contract killer who subcontracted. No one had been able to pin him down to a crime. Ed Moody had spent his life trying. Francis Darwin had spent his life writing about it. Ed Moody had made his fame and fortune. An English writer churning out stories about a U.S. private eye. Characters, plot, dialogue, style all cribbed from the likes of Woolrich, Chandler, Hammett. Darwin had sold more than all of them. Shifted copies like steaks at a Moscow butchers. For a while. And the critics had been silent. They can't say too much when a guy's successful - sounds elitist. But then sales dropped, and the critics dropped on his back - 'Carelessly plotted and poorly executed' - 'Two dimensional characters' - 'Inconsistencies of time and place' - 'One dimensional characters' - 'Tiresomely repetitive and cliched' - 'Absurd' - and the latest wag - 'No-dimensional characters.'

It was all true.

'Ed Moody's Last Case' would be different. It had to be.

Darwin stood by the side of the bed, in a red satin-effect dressing-gown. A relic from the days when he had believed writers ought to possess such things.

The boy was snoring softly under the covers, strongly outlined jaw, classic Eton jet black hair, the blankets a clinging outline for his body. One shoulder bare to the midnight. Darwin bent down over him. The boy's skin was smooth cream, caught in the stray moonlight from a gap in the curtains. He briefly touched his lips to the boy's shoulder, then turned away.

He couldn't resist another glance, wondering if the boy had moved, felt that briefest of touches, found the hole in the bed where now only the night slept. The boy was in the same position, breath even, a faint smile

on his sleeping face. Unmoved.

Darwin knew he had no right to expect anything else. He left the money on the table, and dressed - jacket, trousers, shirt, tie, then shoes, scarf, overcoat. Clothed in respectability. He stared for a long time at the coffee stained papers piled haphazardly beside the typewriter - 'Ed Moody's Last Case', nearly complete. Just waiting for that killer ending, the one that would set this, his last book, apart. He knew it would come. Tonight. He knew that was what had woken him hours before dawn. The ending waiting for him out there, in the night, on the streets. Wanting to be found. The tale calling to its teller.

Darwin pushed the door open.

* * *

The door opened. The whole winds of Chicago slunk in. Ed Moody was blown in on them. He wore no overcoat, just a baggy, cream slub-suit, crumpled like it had been slept in for a week, and splattered with machine gun trails of mud from the chase. He had the kind of face that made you think that just living his life must be a real bitch. Dirty, gray, swollen circles bulged out below his eyes like silicon implants.

Ed hauled himself over to the bar. He lit up a filterless smoke, and ordered bourbon with a shot of ice in a voice thick with nicotine. He tossed it down in one, with the cigarette still stuck in the side of his mouth. The ice was dry in the bottom of the glass when he put it back down on the counter.

"There's going to be a murder," Ed Moody said. No one spoke for a while. Tempting to call it a deathly hush, but they hadn't been talking too much anyhow.

The guy who finally spoke just said: "Yeah?" He slid his bottle across the bar - whiskey moonshine, and a tumbler which he kept emptying. He lurched off his stool. It span and span and span, a whirl of crone. He landed on the stool next to Moody, splashed some more whiskey in the tumbler.

"How d'ya know?" The guy's eyes slid up and down Moody searching for a focus - like balls in a roulette wheel. He smelt like are finery, high-octane drunk.

"I had a tip-off," lied Ed Moody.

"Who from?" The drunk was making a pretty valiant effort not to slur.

Moody sighed that world-weary sigh of his. "You just get tip-offs. Maybe a call, a note, a sign. You never know who they're from."

"So who's the lucky guy? The hit?" The drunk had pretty much got his act together, shaken off the drink.

"I'll know when I see him," said Ed Moody. The voice flat, confident; it said everything.

"You're kidding me, right? You're talking like something outta those trashy books you find on the shelves at bus depots. That's just fiction."

"They say truth is stranger than fiction." Moody's voice was deadpan, monotone. "In my line of business you sometimes get to wondering what's truth and what's fiction, where one ends and the other begins."

The guy poured another generous dose of whiskey in the tumbler, and slumped protectively over it on the bar. The brief lucidity disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"Where does truth meet fiction? Where's the barriers between truth and fiction, how do we know if what we see is real, who makes it up? Who knows? Who tells? Truth is stranger than truth, fiction meets the boundary between truth and the barrier, the barrier where truth meets fiction." His speech had become an alcoholic blur, tongue lolling out of control, flopping from one side of his mouth to the other like a rat slowly dying in a trap. "The hit, the hit, who's it, who's hit, who's the hit?"

But Ed Moody had already left.

* * *

Francis Darwin left the flat behind. The night was cold and dark and quiet. The fog from the Mersey crawled across the sky, swirled in thick shards around the city. Liverpool. His Liverpool - the city he called Chicago in all the Ed Moody books. He knew the Liverpool night. All the books had begun and ended on nights like these. How many nights? He no longer knew. By day, by light, the city had changed. By night it was always the same. Grey shadows looming up to the sky, the quiet threat of its silent stone, the carrion smell of the river, perhaps -

imagined - the rolling, swirling sounds of the water caught between conflicting currents. The bleakness inspired him, walking through the city at night he could imagine himself in Ed Moody's world - a twilight world, a world where the bad guys always won. Liverpool was a city where the bad guys had won long ago. It was a monument of hopelessness in the night.

Darwin walked the streets, waiting for the ideas to come. Searching for an ending. Danger lived in these streets, a living current of criminals, killers, pushers and rapists. Darwin imagined himself immune, impervious - these were his streets. Even the street where the lights stayed on in all the upstairs rooms through out the night, where headlights crawled in an endless stream along the kerbs, where every now and then a painted-on face grinned lunatically out of the fog, and where the silent exertions in the upstairs rooms went on and on and on.

And the street where homeless boys slept, trying to keep their starving bodies warm between the cold pavements and newspapers and threadbare covers. Dirty boys who would do anything for a bath, a night's sleep in a warm bed, and enough money just to go on living for a few days more. And did. The street where Darwin found himself drawn over and over again. He thought of the boy back in his bed. He would have taken the money and gone by the time Darwin returned. Nothing else would be missing. The boys were unfailingly honest in their humiliation.

Darwin passed this time, let the fog clear his head. A cold breeze stirred up rubbish in the gutters, hamburger wrappers floated on the air for a few brief seconds, then fell. It was a sea-breeze, but diluted and polluted this far inland. It tasted acrid and bitter in Darwin's lungs. He could feel the night growing impatient. It was telling and he wasn't listening.

Rico Moronie, he was the key. What to do with his contract-killer, it all hinged on him. It was going to be a tough decision. Over the years, if he was honest, he had grown more fond of his gangster than he was of his detective. Maybe that was when things had started to go wrong. Rico Moronie, hmm.

* * *

Rico Moronie was slouched up against the bar, listening to a girl coming on to him like her life depended on it. It probably did. She was dressed like some gangster's moll; her clothes had no practical role beyond foreplay. Everything was cut too small or too short, the girl looked like she was about to explode. She was attractive in a five-hours-spent-in-front-of-the-mirror kind of way.

Moronie's eyes were fixed in her direction, but he was closely watching the door. It opened, and a little short guy walked in. He had a razor-blade mustache, and hair oiled down to his scalp. He was a pimp, and doing nothing to hide it. He saw Moronie and broke into a great big sycophantic smile. He made to come over, but Moronie stopped him with a flicker of an eye lid. The pimp ordered hot rum at the bar and kept on looking at a gold watch which dangled an orgy of fake carats from his breast pocket.

The door opened again, Moronie almost missed it. The boy walked unobtrusively in. Lawrence, his name was, Moronie remembered. Tall, tubercular thin, not good looking but striking, sallow complexion, wearing a too-big overcoat which looked like it had done about ten years of trench warfare. Moronie extracted himself from the girl's clutches, and headed off for the john.

* * *

Darwin headed deeper into the night, feeling the pull of whatever it was in his mind, drawing him. Moronie, Moronie, there was nothing for it. Moody would have to catch him this time. He had to, for his last case. Ed Moody's swansong. Francis Darwin's swansong. He didn't have the heart for any more. And there was just a short four-letter acronym between him and eternity. Four letters getting bigger and bigger.

He wanted to go out on a high.

The streets were nearly empty, a few late party-goers, a few early workers, and maybe a few adventurers like himself, searching for something in the night. He walked on.

What about the pimp? Maybe he was the



key. The joker in the pack. A twist. A contract out on Moronie? No, ridiculous. 'It never stopped you before', said the critic in his head. But no. How to end the Moody adventures? A question for a mist thick night, the river grey and sluggish, and suddenly much nearer, glinting in the near distance.

Darwin turned away and headed back into the city proper, towards life.

* * *

Life had been treating Rico Moronie good of late. He whistled a Dixie tune as he stood urinating a healthy stream. There was a sudden blast of noise from the bar, then quiet again. The sound of the door opening. Moronie carefully looked around at the newcomer. It was the kid. He looked pale and nervous as hell. The kid began to fiddle with his zipper in front of the urinal.

"It's okay, kid, we're alone. You didn't come in here for a piss."

The kid reluctantly did up his flap.

"You'll know him when he walks in. He's a middle-aged guy, a VIP. He'll be wearing a suit and tie. I'll tip you the wink when he arrives. You know what to do. You're carrying?" The kid nodded. "Good, good. Go see Ginelli afterwards, he'll settle with you."

Moronie walked out without even a glance back. The kid found that he needed to urinate after all.

* * *

All around the night was lit up with neon carved explosions in the sky, like fireworks trapped in glass-letter mazes. Nonstop exotic attractions flashed in monotonous rhythms. A girl walked up to Darwin. She looked tired. She was a long way off her patch. She was either finished for the night or just starting.

"Show you a good time, mister?" They were just words, she didn't believe in what she was saying. She was like something out of Ed Moody's world.

"You wouldn't know how to, lady," that's what Ed Moody would have said,

thought Darwin, except in Moody's case it wouldn't be true. Darwin didn't answer the girl, instead he opened his wallet and peeled out a note. A tenner, that was okay. He handed it to her, then started to walk away. Like a killer in a Hitchcock film, wrapped in a scarf, walking into the fog.

The prostitute quickly caught him up. She had a lovely honest smile, and smiled it for him. She was almost pretty.

"Thanks mister," she said in a thick Scouse accent which hadn't been there before, then she planted a big kiss on the side of his mouth, and was gone.

Darwin was left in the street surrounded in an aroma of pink lipstick and cheap perfume. He walked faster, to try and shake it off. He got to giggling, imagining the headlines. 'Famous Writer In Prostitute Pay-Off Denies Sexual Relations'. It gave him a good feeling to have given her the money all the same, and he tried not to think about the boys who had to do so much more for so little more.

A girl. A girl like that could entrap the likes of Rico Moronie, bring him down. Ed Moody would be interested in a girl like that.

* * *

Ed Moody sat in a corner of the bar where the light was darkest. Eyes hooded in shadow, he looked like an old and not particularly well-liked painting, hidden away in a corner.

Moody was watching things closely; it was a subtle piece of camouflage. He didn't think Moronie would recognise him, but he had to cover all the options.

He had watched Moronie disappear out back, and then the kid follow. Later, but not long enough. His shaking fingers holding the glass were a dead give-away anyhow. The evidence was only circumstantial, it wouldn't have a chance of standing up in court, but they had a trump card. The hit was a set-up; a stooge. If anyone tried anything it could only trace back to Moronie. Ed Moody grinned in the shadows, and went on watching his adversary. He poured another splash of gin in the glass, and settled down to wait. He was in no hurry, he'd waited long enough for this.

* * *

Wait, don't force it, let it come. Darwin had learnt that through years of experience. Let the muse take its own sweet time. He hesitated outside the bar - a neon-lit all nighter stuck down a back street. He knew what these places were like, people drifted into them like debris borne on a night breeze. What the hell, it was turning into a long night. Darwin needed a drink, something to shore him up against the fog which was gradually finding an insidious way in.

Darwin pushed the door open. No sound rushed out to greet him, just a faint clinking of glasses, a muted conversation. He let the door swing closed behind him, and began to unbutton his coat on the way to the bar.

He ordered vodka and orange, and looked around his fellow drinkers, wondering what had driven them here, at this time, on this night. Next to him was a guy who looked like a grown-up version of the kid he'd left behind in the flat. Grown-up, huh, he was all of 23. He was drinking too much and too fast. He looked like some great tragedy had just happened or was just about to. Darwin was reminded of all those fifties movies about the decent kid who gets in with the wrong crowd, until he meets the girl who makes him give it up. This kid looked sorely in need of that girl.

Darwin's eyes furtively lingered over the kid's aquiline figure, the muscles tensed, alive and quivering with tension. Darwin's eyes caught in the apex of that 90 degree where trousers meet torso. There was an obvious and discernible bulge in the kid's trousers. Absurdly Darwin was reminded of Mae West's old chestnut of a line - 'Is that a gun in your pocket, or...', and almost laughed. The kid looked up nervously, frightfully, at Darwin. Ed Moody's ending was the furthest thing from Darwin's mind.

* * *

Ed Moody had the end of this case in his sights. His net drawing in. Ropes snaking around and around Moronie. Tied so tight he'd never escape. Moody had watched Rico ostentatiously kiss

the broad goodbye, and take her number which he would never call, and leave, with the satisfaction of knowing that the next door Moronie walked through would be a metal one with a key on the wrong side.

The kid was still at the bar, drinking with some middle-aged guy who had just wandered over. Moody was watching the door, waiting for his man, Moronie's 'hit'. The guy knew the score, but all the same Moody wouldn't have been in his shoes for all the smack in Harlem.

Moody waited, and Moody watched, but Moody hadn't seen Rico tip the kid the wink just before he left.

* * *

The kid refused the drink. Darwin pressed it - the kid was kind of cute, but he shrank away from Darwin in something like horror. Darwin noticed the short wiry man watching him closely - much too closely for a bar like this where nobody watched anything much other than the bottom of their glasses. He thought he understood. The man wore a check spiv. suit; they didn't come any seedier. When he saw Darwin looking he pulled out a pocket-watch and stared at it meaningfully. He must 'look after' the kid. Darwin shook his head, smiled. Not tonight, not another.

There was an odd hush over the bar, or maybe not so odd in the early hours. The barman whistled something softly in ragtime as he dried glasses. Darwin looked around; a boy and a girl holding hands with nowhere to make out and nowhere better to go; single men - just been or just going to visit the neon attractions. A sad figure huddled in the shadows in a shabby suit - he looked like a salesman who hadn't made a sale since 1962.

There was nothing here for Darwin. He knew he must leave, back into the cold night whispering its endings. Searching for his own killer ending. Searching for the ending he owed Ed Moody. He left. He suspected it was already found.

* * *

Moody's guy still hadn't showed. Where the hell was he? Maybe he'd got cold feet. Moody could hardly have

blamed him. Catching Moronie wouldn't mean so much to someone else.

A fresh crowd were coming in. Girls in natty outfits and guys with fat wallets. Must be turning out time at the hostess clubs. Moody watched them file in. He watched the guy in the overcoat leave, the one who'd been talking to the kid.

The kid followed. As he walked swiftly by, Moody clearly saw the pistol outlined in his pocket.

"Oh Christ, oh Jesus H. Mother-fucking Christ!" Moody whispered softly. He stood up. There were people in the way, he pushed them aside, and rushed for the door. But the kid had a start on him, a big start. And the guy in the coat had had so little.

"Christ," he muttered again through clenched teeth. He pushed the door open. The night stared back at him, the moon a yellow chalk crescent on a blackboard. The air was smoky, Moody imagined the smell of cordite pungent in the still air, he looked down one way and then the other and then -

The shot was a dull, monstrous echo of the one Moody had been hearing in his head ever since he had seen the kid leave - a figure ahead falling slowly to the ground, footsteps running distantly away, the night opening up, welcoming them, a shadow merging with shadows.

Ed Moody ran. The guy in the overcoat was already dead when he got to him. Moody watched his eyelids roll open on beads of glass. There was the slow red seep of blood above his chest, the muscles seizing up in this dead sprawl. The - imagined - smell of cordite was stronger, mixed with the sharp salt odour of his blood, seeping freely, congealing.

Moody pulled the dead man's wallet out of his jacket pocket, hunted for an I.D. He found a driving licence.

Francis Darwin was his name.

Craig Turner lives in Saffron Walden, Essex, although he has recently told us about his plans to embark on a "...Working-round-the-world thing..." We wish him all the best. However, don't despair, we still have a collection of his work which have yet to see the light of day.



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